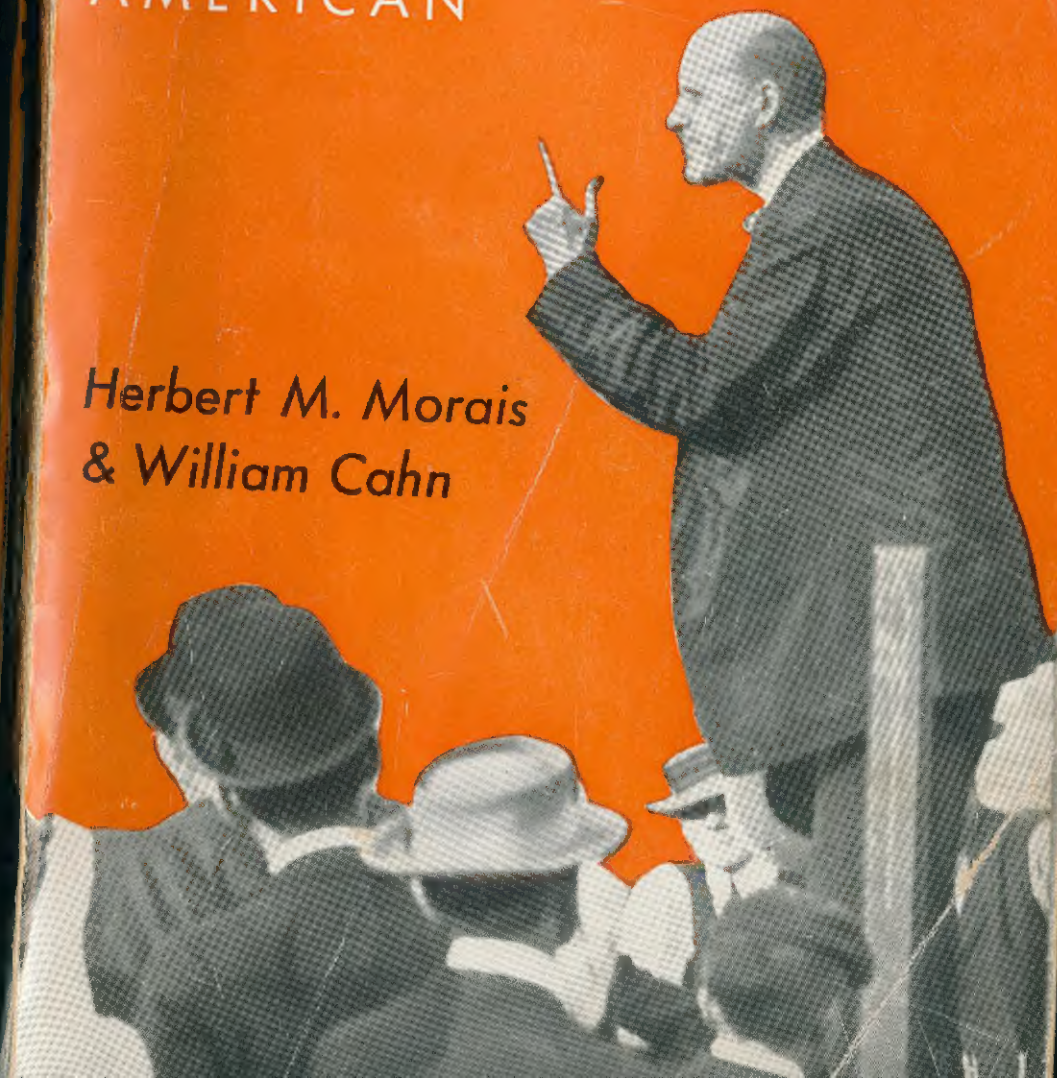


# Gene Debs

THE STORY OF A FIGHTING  
AMERICAN

*Herbert M. Morais  
& William Cahn*



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*The Story of a Fighting American*

BY HERBERT M. MORAIS AND WILLIAM CAHN



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## Foreword

The story of Gene Debs is the story of a fighting American. It is the story of a man who hated injustice and human exploitation and championed the cause of working men and women.

Because he was an effective fighter for the people, Debs was slandered during his lifetime by powerful forces in control of the nation's wealth. Today, years after his death, he continues to be misrepresented—often by those who profess to be his admirers but who see in his militancy the mistakes of a good-hearted man.

Our book is not a complete or critical study. It does not include all phases of Debs's life and work, nor does it attempt to evaluate all of his actions as seen in the light of today.

We merely present the main facts in a simple, readable form. Many more books about Debs will follow. Ours does not pretend to be more than an introduction—thoroughly documented and based on fact—to a militant fighter.

Gene Debs is part of America. To know him and his times is to know a great American tradition. And to act according to this tradition is to guarantee a future of security and peace.

We have used as sources Debs's own writings, newspaper and magazine articles and speeches as well as accounts of contemporaries. For the sake of readability, footnotes have been omitted. However, all quotations and references have been carefully checked and a list of materials used can be found in the back.

H. M. M.

W. C.



## Introduction

*And there's 'Gene Debs—a man 'at stands  
And jest holds out in his two hands  
As warm a heart as ever beat  
Betwixt here and the Jedge ment Seat.*

JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY

"What's the excitement, friend?"

"It's Debs. They've just let him out of prison."

Yes, Eugene V. Debs was a free man again. That morning he had breakfast with Sheriff Eckert in the county jail at Woodstock, Illinois.

He had slept peacefully on his last night in prison. At one second after midnight, the sheriff tapped him on the shoulder and told him he was free.

All that day and night great crowds, men, women, and children, had been gathering in front of the jail to catch a glimpse of Debs as he left. Many had come from long distances—some fifty-five miles by special train from Chicago. They wanted to see the man who, during the Pullman strike, had defied the most powerful railroad magnates of the day.

As Debs, suitcase in hand and accompanied by his brother, Theodore, left Woodstock jail on the afternoon of November 22, 1895, he was instantly surrounded by excited, yelling men and women.

A group of brawny workingmen pushed their way through the crowd. "Lift him up so we can all see him!" one of them shouted.

And so Debs was hoisted and carried on willing shoulders toward the railroad station. A crowd, estimated at ten thousand, swung in behind the men who carried Debs aloft.

The cheering was terrific. Those who were near him hugged and kissed him. Others simply felt for his hand and, even if only a touch, seemed satisfied. Responding to the spirit of the occasion, a band quickly gathered its instruments and began to play. As the parade reached the station, the crowd surged around the train and hundreds went on board.

The ride to Chicago was made amid music and singing. In the company of friends and relatives, Debs relaxed completely.

When the train drew into the Wells Street station of Chicago, despite rain, mud and slush, more than a hundred thousand people swarmed into the shed of the depot, sweeping Debs off his feet.

Again Debs was lifted to the shoulders of his friends and carried to a waiting carriage. The huge crowd fell into line for the parade.

But when Debs saw the carriage, he refused to enter it. "No," he said. "If the rest walk, I shall walk, too. What is good enough for them is also good enough for me."

Who was this man—Eugene Victor Debs? Who was this man so tenderly loved by so many—and so savagely hated by his enemies?

"Eugene V. Debs!" wrote Edwin Markham, the celebrated poet, "This is one of the great names of the century."

"There may have lived some time, somewhere, a kindlier, gentler, more generous man than Eugene Debs, but I have never known him," wrote Clarence Darrow, the famous lawyer.

Yet—on July 9, 1894—the *New York Times* described Debs as "an enemy of the human race." The *Chicago Herald* called him a "reckless, ranting . . . law-breaker."

And it was a spokesman for the railroads who said: "We can handle the other labor leaders, but we cannot handle Debs.

We have got to wipe him out . . ."

Yes, this was Debs—five times candidate for President of the United States—the man who received almost a million votes while in prison for opposing America's participation in World War I.

Imprisoned for many years, hounded by powerful corporations, loved by the people, what did this man do and say that earned him such love and hatred?

## The Making of a Union Man

*To attend the "meeting" was my supreme joy and for ten years I was not once absent when the faithful assembled.*

The Debs who first saw the inside of a prison during the great Pullman strike of 1894 was the acknowledged leader of the railroad workers of America. They knew him, trusted him, and loved him, for he was one of them.

Like his father before him, Gene Debs was a hard-working man. His parents, Jean Daniel and Marguerite Marie Betterich Debs, had come to America from Alsace in 1849. Soon after their arrival here, they moved west, settling in the rough, frontier town of Terre Haute, located on the Wabash in western Indiana.

The elder Debs went to work in a meat-packing house where he worked long hours at low wages. And as Terre Haute changed from a meat-packing to a railroad center, Debs helped lay the ties on the first railroad that passed through. But the pay on the railroads was pitifully small and the elder Debs was not able to support his family. So he and his wife set up a grocery store which gave them a slightly larger income. This extra money was needed because the family was growing.

On November 5, 1855, Eugene Victor Debs was born, one of ten children. Of these children, only six were to live to adult age, four girls, Eugene and his brother, Theodore. None of these children was able to afford much schooling. And so most

of Gene's education was self-education. He liked to read the writings of such famous Americans as George Washington, Thomas Paine, and Patrick Henry.

But he did not have much time for this. At the age of fourteen, young Gene was mixing paints in the shops of the old Vandalia railroad in Terre Haute. A year later he became a locomotive fireman. The pay, though small, was needed by the Debs family.

But work on the railroads not only involved long hours; it was hard and dangerous as well. Wrecks and accidents were frequent. One resulted in the sudden death of two of Gene's closest friends, an engineer and a fireman. Debs's mother began to worry. She begged him to give up his job. So Gene, at the age of nineteen, found work as a clerk in a grocery store in Terre Haute.

But his heart was elsewhere. He loved the railroad and, above all, the hard-working men who kept the trains moving.

"As a locomotive fireman," Debs wrote later, "I learned of the hardships of the rail in snow, sleet and hail, of the ceaseless danger that lurks along the iron highway, the uncertainty of employment, scant wages and altogether trying lot of the workingman, so that from my very boyhood I was made to feel the wrongs of labor . . ."

With such a background, it was inevitable that Debs was to become a union man.

One cold evening in February, 1875, Joshua A. Leach, Grand Master of the newly formed Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, came to Terre Haute to organize a local lodge. Among the twenty-one railroad workers attending that first meeting was a tall young man with a thoughtful, intelligent face. His name was Eugene V. Debs.

Debs was at once attracted by Leach's "rugged honesty, simple manner and homely speech." Recalling the occasion years later, he wrote: "How well I remember feeling his large rough hand on my shoulder, the kindly eye of an elder brother

searching my own as he gently said, 'My boy, you're a little young, but I believe you're in earnest and will make your mark in the brotherhood.' Of course I assured him I would do my best."

Some months later Leach, who was attending a meeting in St. Louis, stated: "I put a tow-headed boy in the brotherhood at Terre Haute not long ago, and some day he will be at the head of it."

Thus, Eugene Victor Debs, at the age of nineteen, entered the trade union movement which was then gaining members, especially among the tens of thousands of underpaid and underprivileged men who worked the railroads.

The country at the time was in the midst of a severe economic crisis. Describing the deep-seated depression of 1873 to 1878, Debs spoke of it as a time when "factories and workshops closed down; railroads reduced wages and discharged thousands. The country swarmed with unemployed workingmen; everybody was ominously discussing the 'panic' and 'hard times.' . . . It was a period of financial bankruptcy, industrial stagnation and general gloom . . ."

Just before the hard times had set in, the locomotive firemen decided to organize their own Brotherhood as the railroad engineers had done almost ten years before. And under the direction of Leach, by 1875 some 4,000 railroad workers had joined the organization.

Among them was young Debs—likeable and alert, over six feet tall, sturdy and intelligent, the type of man the labor movement needed and wanted. Debs was chosen secretary of Vigo Lodge. So imbued was he by the idea of union organization, that when he joined the Lodge—according to his own statement—he paid "the admission fee of half the charter members, who had not the money of their own to pay . . ."

Yet, despite Debs's ability and hard work, Vigo Lodge made little progress. The membership was frightened, frightened by what was taking place in the country.

The depression still held the nation in its grasp. Railroad owners, attempting to maintain as high a level of profits as possible, cut wages more than a dollar a day. The railroad men fought back.

As a result, a great railroad strike took place, one of the most important in the nation's history.

Starting in West Virginia in 1877, the stoppage spread quickly to Pittsburgh and the Middle West. Some of the largest railroads in the country were at a standstill. In addition, workers in a number of cities all over the nation went on strike in sympathy. The country was on the verge of a general walkout.

Fighting desperately, the workers seized railroad yards and commandeered trains. State militiamen and Federal troops were called out. Sharp clashes took place between them and the strikers. Some townspeople rallied to the side of the striking workers. Men and women were beaten, shot, and killed.

The commercial newspapers helped break the strike by spreading confusion and calling the workers "tramps, thieves, incendiaries and communists." Under such a barrage, the strike was finally crushed but not before it had cut deep into the minds and emotions of people everywhere.

Debs, in Terre Haute, took careful note of what was happening. But reflecting the confusion of many union men of the time, he expressed himself as strongly opposed to strikes. To him they meant "anarchy and revolution."

Speaking as a delegate to the Fourth Annual Convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen in Indianapolis, September, 1877, his first speech at a labor convention, Debs said:

"The question has often been asked 'Does the Brotherhood encourage strikers?' To this question, we most emphatically answer, 'No . . .'"

The applause was light but the young man was satisfied with himself.

Although he did not realize it at the time, the unsuccessful railroad strike of 1877 almost wiped out his beloved Vigo



Lodge. The men, terror-stricken by the savage repression of the railroad owners, stayed away from meetings so that soon only Debs was left. However, little by little, he brought them back into the union, gathering together enough members to keep the organization going.

What was happening to the Terre Haute lodge was happening to other lodges throughout the country. By 1879 there remained only 60 lodges with 1,200 dues-paying members. The Brotherhood was seemingly on its last legs. To make matters worse, the following year—1880—the national secretary-treasurer of the organization disappeared, taking with him the little money still remaining in the treasury. In desperation the Grand Master of the Brotherhood, F. W. Arnold, begged Debs to become secretary-treasurer and editor-in-chief of the union's official newspaper.

Debs took the job.

"Stick to us, boys," he told the delegates, the first encouraging voice heard in many months, "and in another year, I will guarantee the brotherhood will be out of debt."

Debs worked for nothing that year. Actually, he spent \$800 of his own money to help carry on the work of the Brotherhood. He enlisted the aid of two of his sisters and of his brother Theodore, who was to be his trusted companion throughout his life. All three relieved him of the paper work attached to his office.

By the end of 1880, the Brotherhood was beginning to recover. And the railroads, like other industries, were expanding as thousands of miles of new tracks were being laid.

Under such conditions the Brotherhood prospered. By 1883 it was out of debt, had 181 lodges, and 8,000 members. No wonder at the Brotherhood's convention that year in Denver Debs was given a greater ovation than the guest, the celebrated Henry Ward Beecher, greatest pulpit orator of his day.

The union was saved and Debs had done it.

"My first step was thus taken in organized labor," Debs

writes of this period, "and a new influence fired my ambition and changed the whole current of my career. I was filled with enthusiasm and my blood fairly leaped in my veins. Day and night I worked for the brotherhood . . . To attend the 'meeting' was my supreme joy and for ten years I was not once absent when the faithful assembled . . . With all the fire of youth I entered upon the crusade which seemed to fairly glitter with possibilities . . . Day and night were one. Sleep was time wasted . . ."

Filled with enthusiasm, young Debs answered the call for union organization.

"Without in the least boasting about it, I organized or helped to organize nearly all the railroad unions and many others . . . I organized the Brotherhood of Railroad Brakemen, now the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, wrote its first constitution, prepared all of its printed forms and gave my time freely to its service, for which I never permitted the brotherhood to pay me a cent . . ."

J. P. MacDonagh, president of the Terre Haute local of the Typographical Union, of which Debs was later made an honorary member, points out that Debs helped to organize most of the town's trade unions. ". . . Many a night did we rouse him out of bed," MacDonagh relates, "to come and help settle some dispute or other between employer and employees, for the printers, the painters, the lathers and the plasterers, the coopers, the cigar makers, the carpenters, the brick makers, the hod carriers, and many others . . ."

Another Terre Haute labor leader described Debs's office as the headquarters for organized unions of every kind and form. When unions needed money, they went to Debs; when they were in trouble, they went to Debs; when they had grievances, they went to Debs. . ."

Nor did Debs confine his organizing activities to Terre Haute, his home town. On the contrary, he was ever ready to leave on some new organizing mission. His grip was always

packed. Although he had no money, his railroad buddies saw to it that he rode free of charge.

"I rode on the engines over mountain and plain," he recalled years later, "slept in the cabooses and bunks, and was fed from their pails by the swarthy stokers . . . And so I was spurred on in the work of organizing, . . . and as I had now become known as an organizer, the calls came from all sides and there are but few trades I have not helped to organize. . ."

## Folks Liked Gene Debs

*. . . this man is loved—here, near his own fire-side, where we know him.*

Eugene Debs was a generous, big-hearted man. People told many stories about his kindness.

On one occasion when Debs arrived in Philadelphia to address a meeting, he was met at the station by a group of friends. "Horace," he called to one of the group, "have you got any money?" His friend reached into his pocket and gave him twenty dollars.

"I haven't a cent," explained Debs. "On my way coming east there was an old woman with several children, and the poor soul had lost her ticket. The conductor was going to put her off. I gave her every cent I had so she could go on her way."

On another occasion a locomotive fireman who had been out of work for some time stopped Debs to tell him that a job had been offered him on the railroad. But, the man explained, he needed a watch before he could go to work. Debs immediately took out his own and gave it to the man telling him to return it when he was able to buy one for himself.

No one in need was ever turned away from the Debs home. In addition to food and money, Debs gave the very clothes from his back.

"He always gives away his clothes to those who come to his door," his wife is quoted as saying, "and he gives his best suits, never his old ones."

Debs was not only a generous man, but a family man, too. As a boy he loved his parents dearly.

"There are two words in our language forever sacred to memory," Debs said later in his life, "Mother and Home."

In many ways he often paid tribute to his mother. Calling her the "dominant influence in [his] life," he said, "Whatever of good there is in me, I owe to her."

Debs liked to take part in the small duties and tasks of the home. Telling a story about himself one day, Debs said: "I am the official swabber of my back alley. I give it a bath every day."

"One day at home while I was sweeping the alley, an old neighbor of mine, a very poor man, came along and said: 'Look here, Mr. Debs, you're keeping a good man out of a job by sweeping that alley yourself!'

"Well, neighbor . . . how much a day would you get for doing this work?"

"Two dollars," answered the man.

"So I gave him the two dollars," said Debs concluding the story, "and I kept the job and we were both happy and contented."

When Debs was thirty he married Katherine Metzel. Two years younger than himself, she was a golden-haired beauty who had come to Terre Haute in 1866 with her mother and step-father.

Wedding presents came to the couple from Brotherhood lodges throughout the country: parlor furniture from Chicago, a bedroom set from Buffalo, a large silver pitcher from Boston, and a silver water service from Kansas City.

It happened that once while Debs was busy campaigning for the Presidency he stopped in Pittsburgh. By chance he was given the same hotel room he and Mrs. Debs had occupied on the night of their marriage. Tenderly he wrote her:

"It is many years ago since first we came under the roof of this old hotel as bride and groom and it seems to me that from

that day to this we have enjoyed together an unbroken honeymoon. When I took you as my wife, I did not lose you as my friend and comrade, and the years that trail behind us have borne beautiful testimony to the sweetness and sanctity of our love. I think of you every moment. . . ."

Mrs. Debs not only kept house, but helped her husband by taking his letters down in long-hand. And she did not hesitate to take him to task when she thought he was not writing the proper thing. As Debs put it:

"I would be prancing up and down the floor, like this, my tongue's tip laden with gems of genius, when all at once I would look at Kate and she wouldn't be writing a word. I would say 'Now, what's the matter?' and she would reply: 'That is perfect nonsense!'"

Although married in an Episcopal church, near his home, Debs confessed allegiance to no formal religion. Early in life he became what he termed a disbeliever.

"When I was a boy about fifteen years old," he relates, "I went to hear a sermon one Sunday morning in old St. Joseph's Catholic Church here [Terre Haute], and the priest delivered an address on 'Hell' . . ."

"He pictured a thousand demons and devils with horns and bristling tails, clutching pitchforks, steeped in brimstone, and threatening to consume all who did not accept the interpretation of Christianity as given by the priest . . ."

Much later in life, while imprisoned for his anti-war activities in the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta, Debs was visited by a priest and a preacher.

"I told my friends of the cloth," he recounted, "that I did not believe Christ was meek and lowly, but a real, living, vital agitator who went into the Temple with a lash and a knout and whipped the oppressors of the poor, routed them out of doors and spilled their blood-got silver on the floor."

"He told the robbed and misruled and exploited and driven people to disobey their plunderers! He denounced the prof-

iteers, and it was for this that they nailed his quivering body to the cross and spiked it to the gates of Jerusalem."

Although he had none of his own, he loved children dearly. "Childhood," Debs wrote. "What a holy theme! Flowers they are, with souls in them, and if on this earth man has a sacred charge, a holy obligation, it is to these tender buds and blossoms of humanity."

The love that Debs had for children—as well as the principles he held—led him to condemn child labor with all of the power he had.

"What words can fitly describe the life tragedy of the children of the poor?" he once declared. "Society's doors are all closed against them . . . There is absolutely no excuse for the widespread poverty that now scourges mankind . . . Child labor is not only unnecessary in this age but a crime against both the children and society . . ."

On one occasion Debs and his wife opened their home to an unfortunate young woman. This was the signal for a storm of harsh words from the newspapers which accused Debs of darkening "his threshold with the shadow of a fallen woman."

Commenting on this later, Debs said, "There is but one thing remarkable about opening our home to an unfortunate young woman and that is that anyone should consider it remarkable."

This, then, was Eugene Debs, walking down the streets of Terre Haute, favorite of men, women and children—one of the most popular men in town.

A neighbor said of him:

"Personally the man is immaculate. I never knew a cleaner man. But he could not be taken for a model of fashion. That one dark suit of clothes, it seems to me, he has worn from the beginning of time . . . If it is possible for men to love each other, I should say that this man is loved—here, near his own fireside, where we know him."

Young Debs was indeed a man of attractive appearance—an expressive mouth, blue eyes, powerful chin, light hair. Towering more than six feet in height, he was an impressive figure wherever he went.

He was well known not only as a leader of labor in Terre Haute but also as founder and prime mover of the town's Occidental Literary Club.

In 1878, Debs persuaded Wendell Phillips and Colonel Robert Ingersoll, two of the greatest orators of the day, to come to Terre Haute and speak before the club. Two years later, Debs brought Susan B. Anthony, the celebrated fighter for woman suffrage, to town to speak on the question of the right of women to vote.

When she arrived in Terre Haute, Debs relates, "even my friends were disgusted with me for piloting such an 'undesirable citizen' into the community. As we walked down the street, I was painfully aware that Miss Anthony was an object of derision and contempt, and in my heart I resented it."

But whether the people of Terre Haute agreed with him or not they liked him. "We consider Mr. Debs unselfish and generous-hearted," his employer Mr. Hullman of the wholesale grocery firm said of him. "His chief delight seems to be to serve others. In all business transactions between us, we have found him to be honorable and upright—a man of strict honesty and integrity. . ."

As might have been expected, such a man as Eugene V. Debs was a promising prospect for local politics. He attracted the attention of both the Democratic and Republican parties. But the Democrats got there first. They offered him the Congressional nomination which he refused to accept. Then they tried again, this time proposing that he run for City Clerk.

Debs accepted and in 1879, was promptly nominated and elected. People felt that a vote for Gene Debs was a vote for someone they could trust. During the four years he was in office, he discharged his duties well. And, at the same time,





*Portrait of young Debs as it appeared in "Harper's Weekly," in 1894, the year of the Great Northern and the Pullman strikes.*

he carried on many tasks connected with his union work.

Meanwhile, the number of his friends and supporters grew and so in 1885 the Democratic Party nominated him for the Indiana State Legislature. He ran and won.

But his term in the assembly proved unsatisfactory to him. When Debs introduced a bill to provide increased security for railroad workers, it was immediately tied up in committee. After a fight he was able to pry it loose and get it to the assembly floor. But petty politics again interfered and the bill was never passed.

As a matter of fact, very little in the way of constructive legislation was adopted. Debs was disgusted by the sight of elected officials more interested in jobs and personal advancement than in the welfare of the working people of the state. Thus, when his term ended, Debs vowed he was through with politics.

Upon his return to Terre Haute, he said to his brother, Theodore: "I am through with [this] business, forever."

Fifteen years later, he was running for President of the United States on the Socialist ticket.

## Growing with the Labor Movement

*When I see suffering about me,  
I myself suffer . . .*

Working people were joining unions. The labor movement was growing.

Two powerful federations of labor appeared on the scene. The first, founded in 1869, was the Noble Order of the Knights of Labor. From a small organization, the Knights developed into a large body, national in scope. In 1883 its membership was 52,000. By 1886 it had risen to 700,000. Membership was open to all workers, skilled and unskilled, regardless of race, color, or creed. On the crucial question of strikes, the leadership of the Knights took the position of opposing them. In the words of Terence V. Powderly, Grand Master of the Order:

"We must teach our members that the remedy for the redress of wrongs we complain of does not lie in the suicidal strike; but it lies in effective organization. Without organization we cannot accomplish anything; through it, we hope to forever banish that curse of modern civilization—wage slavery."

The rank-and-file, however, had different ideas about strikes. They took seriously the slogan of the Order, "an injury to one is the concern of all." And they carried on a series of strikes for higher wages and shorter working hours.

Thus the stage was being set for a struggle which was to rock the nation—the struggle for a shorter work-week, for the eight-hour day.

The fight for a reduction of working hours began with the rise of the factory system when toiling men and women, as well as children, labored from sunrise to sunset. One of the foremost demands of the emerging labor movement of the 1830's was the establishment of a ten-hour day.

During and immediately after the Civil War organized labor launched a movement for an eight-hour day. The campaign was so successful that in 1867 six states passed eight-hour day laws and the following year Congress established an eight-hour day for all government workers, laborers and mechanics.

However, it was almost twenty years later that the eight-hour movement reached its peak. On May 1, 1886, hundreds of thousands of workers in Chicago, New York, and other large cities went on strike for a shorter working day, about 185,000 of them gaining their objective. An aftermath of the bitter struggle in Chicago was the arrest and conviction of eight militant labor leaders on a framed-up charge growing out of a bomb thrown at a meeting, resulting in the death of several persons. Of the eight, four were hanged, one "committed suicide," and three were later pardoned by Governor Altgeld of Illinois, who was convinced of the innocence of all.

Out of the struggle for the eight-hour day in America came international May Day.

In 1888 the American Federation of Labor, founded seven years before, voted to continue the eight-hour movement, fixing May 1, 1890, as the time for action. The following year leaders of the organized labor movement of various countries met in Paris to form an international association of working people. After hearing reports of what had happened in America, they voted to support the eight-hour fight and designated May 1, 1890, for an international eight-hour-day struggle. On that day workers all over Europe showed their solidarity with working people in America by taking part in parades, meetings, and demonstrations for a shorter work day.

The eight-hour-day movement caught the imagination of

Eugene Debs who planned a special edition of the Brotherhood's official organ, the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, around the subject, "Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will."

The American Federation of Labor, which played so important a part in the struggle for the eight-hour day, was an association of national unions primarily devoted to the organization of skilled workers. Representing the "new unionism," it was led by Peter J. McGuire, a Socialist who headed the Carpenters' union; Adolph Strasser, also a Socialist who was president of the Cigar Makers Union; and Samuel Gompers, active in the same union and destined to assume top leadership in the new labor movement.

Because the American Federation of Labor followed a fighting policy, in contrast to the increasing conservatism of the leadership of the Knights of Labor, it flourished and grew. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, knew Debs as one of the leaders of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

Occasionally Gompers wrote articles for the *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*, and Debs, as editor, contributed to A. F. of L. periodicals. Similarly, Gompers addressed the Firemen's conventions, and in 1892 invited Debs to speak before the American Federation of Labor convention at Philadelphia. Illness prevented Debs from speaking.

However, as the years passed, it was apparent that Gompers was opposed to the organization of unskilled workers and to the movement for independent political action. Thus, he was to become the opponent of everything that Debs represented among the working people of the nation.

The rise of national federations of labor profoundly impressed young Debs. The achievements of the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor helped make him conscious of the need for a similar central organization among railroad workers.

Because of this, Debs favored the idea of a federation of the separate and disunited railroad brotherhoods. He was also for such an alliance because of the hard times brought about by the economic setback of 1884-85 and because of the widespread use of the blacklist against railroad workers.

Accordingly, Debs proposed the formation of a true "brotherhood"—a loose alliance of all railroad unions for offensive and defensive purposes under the old American motto: "United we stand, divided we fall."

Debs made it clear that he did not want to establish a federation for purposes of a general strike on the railroads. He wanted a federation in order to be in a better position to arbitrate any differences that might arise between the railroads and their employees.

Debs and the railroad workers were "willing to be considerate and just," but the railroad owners were not. These railroad magnates knew they had a powerful weapon in their hands so long as narrow craft divisions separated one brotherhood from another.

In February, 1888, the engineers on the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad went on strike. This railroad was notorious for paying its workers low wages. The engineers were promptly joined by the firemen.

Debs, hurrying to the scene, urged the two thousand striking firemen and engineers to stick together. "The strike is the weapon of the oppressed," he said, quite a change, it is to be recalled, from his speech at the Brotherhood convention of 1877.

In short, Debs was growing with the labor movement. The rise of federations of labor was a good teacher. And the widespread and frequently successful strikes for better wages and shorter hours taught him a great deal.

Like other big business outfits of the day, the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad used an army of plainclothes men, called Pinkertons, to break the strike.

"Their trade is treason," Debs wrote of them, "their breath pollution."

The strike was broken when the conductors stayed on their jobs and even piloted scab engineers over the line.

Speaking of the strike, Debs said later: "I saw craft union pitted against craft union, and I saw the Brotherhood of Engineers and the Brotherhood of Firemen completely wiped from the C. B. & Q. system."

From that day on a new idea began to influence the thinking and actions of Debs—the idea of *organizing all railroad workers into one big union*. Debs was beginning to see that every time the railroads made a concession to the engineers or to the firemen, it was "at the expense of the poorly-paid employees in other departments who were unorganized . . ."

Therefore, why not organize into one big union? The idea was not a new one. Within the Knights of Labor there had been some unions organized along industrial lines. And even in the new American Federation of Labor—with its emphasis on craft unions—the idea of industrial organization prevailed in one of its principal affiliates, the United Mine Workers.

This idea of industrial unionism haunted the thinking of Gene Debs. It was impossible for him to view any union problem without recognizing its solution in increased unity of working people under one union banner.

Finally, Debs reached a conclusion. It was not an easy one to come to.

In 1892, at the national convention of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen, he recommended the setting up of an organization broad enough to embrace all railroad workers. Furthermore, he stated his intention of devoting all of his time and energy to the building of such an organization and tendered his resignation as secretary-treasurer.

The convention unanimously refused to accept the resigna-

tion. Instead, it suggested that Debs name his own salary. But Debs replied that "it was not a question of salary . . ." He again offered his resignation and insisted upon its acceptance. Finally, the convention agreed, but urged him to continue as editor of the Brotherhood's magazine, which incidentally under Debs's direction was the first of the railway journals to adopt the union label. As a mark of appreciation, the convention presented Debs with \$2,000 for a trip to Europe. But he declined the gift.

In resigning his office, Debs stated: "I do this because it pleases me, and there is nothing I would not do, so far as human effort goes, to advance any movement designed to reach and rescue perishing humanity. I have a heart for others and that is why I am in this work. When I see suffering about me, I myself suffer, and so when I put forth my efforts to relieve others, I am simply working for myself . . ."

Years later Debs was to add: "During the fourteen years I served officially, I never had a vote cast against me, never had a candidate named against me, and never once accepted all the salary the delegates were willing to vote me . . ."

And had Debs been willing to surrender his convictions, he could have remained a Brotherhood officer to the end of his days. As he expressed it, "I could yet be the 'grand' officer of a railway brotherhood, have a comfortable office, a large salary, plenty of friends, including railway and public officials, and read my praises as an 'ideal labor leader' in capitalist newspapers . . ."

But Debs was not the man to give up his principles. And so he became one of the pioneers in a movement that was to see the building of powerful industrial unions uniting working men and women throughout America.



## Taking on James J. Hill

*... for the first time in your life look into the eyes of a man.*

"I was made to realize," said Eugene Debs, "that the old trade union was utterly incompetent to deal successfully with the exploiting corporations . . ."

Debs called them "the exploiting corporations." And they were. Big Business in America was on the march. It was getting bigger and more powerful.

In 1860, when Debs was only five years old, the United States was in fourth place as a manufacturing nation.

In 1894, when Debs was thirty-nine, the United States was in first place, the total value of her manufactured goods coming to nine and a half billion dollars, approximately twice that of her nearest competitor, England, so-called "workshop of the world." And in the same year the railroad mileage of the nation was as great as that of all the countries of Europe combined. From a relatively backward colony of Europe, the United States had become—in less than thirty-five years—the most advanced industrial nation in the world.

Accompanying the rise of the United States to industrial leadership was the coming into being of huge, profit-making corporations. Rockefeller organized his first Standard Oil Company in 1870. Nine years later, 95 per cent of the oil refining capacity of the nation was in his hands. Carnegie opened a steel plant and within a short time, he possessed a vast steel

empire which included coke mines, iron ore deposits, and rolling mills. Havemeyer organized a gigantic sugar-refining combine and soon controlled 98 per cent of the refined sugar made and sold in the country. Duke merged five concerns in 1890 to form the American Tobacco Co. which controlled fully 90 per cent of the total cigarette business of the country. Within less than ten years, it was turning out 95 per cent of the cigarettes produced in the United States.

On the initiative of Morgan, the General Electric Co. was organized and along with the smaller Westinghouse Electric Co. dominated the rapidly rising and extremely important electrical manufacturing field. Morgan was also interested in the railroad industry. When certain railroads found themselves in difficulties, he would step in to "reorganize" them, a polite way of describing "taking them over." By 1892, banker Morgan had his hands in the New York Central, Pennsylvania, Northern Pacific and Chesapeake and Ohio railroad systems.

For men such as Morgan, Duke, Havemeyer, Carnegie, and Rockefeller, the control of a huge industry—or monopoly—was a good and profitable development. But to American farmers, small businessmen, professional people, and wage earners, the coming of monopoly meant being squeezed against the wall. It meant rising production costs for farmers. Giant monopoly combines fixed the price of fertilizers, machines, tools, and wire. Railroad monopolies set the rates at which produce was shipped. Grain elevators, frequently owned by the railroads, determined the cost of storing grain.

While production costs were rising, farm prices were falling. It was cheaper to burn corn on the farm than to ship it to the city. With falling prices and rising costs, farmers were forced to mortgage their property.

Soon fully 27 per cent of the farms of the country were under mortgage. Sons and daughters of farmers and in some cases farmers themselves, unable to eke out a living, moved to the cities to work in factories.

Small businessmen, too, faced the ravages of rising monopoly control. Bankruptcies rose in number. Small businesses were eaten up by big business. And many small businessmen, too, became industrial workers.

For wage earners, the development of monopoly meant harder fought battles for the right to organize and to strike for wages to keep body and soul together. In these struggles, big business used troops, police, scabs, court action, and black-lists.

To protect themselves, the working people of the country formed strong trade unions federated into national organizations of labor. They also engaged in political action, supporting independent labor and Socialist tickets.

It was no wonder that in 1892 some of them joined with farmers to launch a nationwide third party—the People's Party (Populists). This new grouping, in the main springing from farmers' support, declared in unmistakable terms:

"Corruption dominates the ballot-box, the legislatures, the Congress and touches the ermine of the bench. The urban workmen are denied the right to organize for self-protection . . . a hireling standing army, unrecognized by our laws, is established to shoot them down . . . The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few . . . Wealth belongs to him who creates it, and every dollar taken from industry without an equivalent is robbery . . . The interests of rural and civil labor are the same; their enemies identical."

The People's Party candidate in the 1892 Presidential campaign polled 1,027,000 popular votes despite the fact that women did not have the right of suffrage. In the same year the party elected three senators and ten representatives to Congress.

The spirit of unrest and the opposition to the greed of the monopolies were indeed showing themselves in the nation. And this same spirit of unrest was also reflected in the sensitive,

sympathetic person of Eugene V. Debs, who was organizing a new type of union movement which was to capture the imagination of countless working people.

In June 1893, at Chicago, Debs, with "a number of others who had had the same experience and had profited by it," organized the American Railway Union which admitted every worker from section hand to engineer. Even coal miners and car builders were eligible.

Debs was elected president at a salary of \$75 a month, contrasting with the \$333 a month he had received from the Brotherhood before his resignation.

In October, 1893, the newly elected president of the American Railway Union wrote to Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor: "The American Railway Union will soon take its place among the labor organizations of the country. There is no purpose to antagonize existing organizations but it is believed that on account of its superior advantages it will absorb some of them at least and that ultimately there will be one organization for railway employees."

The new organization, popularly known as the A.R.U., grew rapidly. Within a year it had a membership of 150,000, this despite the bitter opposition of the railroad owners.

Commenting on this opposition, Debs later remarked: "They [the railroad owners] understood that its [the union's] purpose was to unify all railroad employes. They knew that the unity of the working class meant their end, and so they set their faces like flint against the American Railway Union . . ."

Among those setting "their faces like flint" against the A.R.U. was James J. Hill, owner of the Great Northern Railway which ran through the northwestern section of the country. Wages on the road ranged from thirty dollars a month for trackmen to eighty dollars a month for train dispatchers. These low wages—and talk of threatened wage slashes—resulted in the great interest shown by the Great Northern workers in an organizing drive launched by the A.R.U. Led by Debs, the

American Railway Union sought to recruit all Great Northern workers into "one big union."

Hearing of the drive, Hill ordered all A.R.U. organizers off the road and all workers sympathetic to the union fired. When Debs was told of this, he and the other leaders of the union swung into action. From A.R.U. headquarters a circular letter was sent urging the railroad men to act quickly and break the chains that were "being forged to reduce [them], not only to slavery, but to starvation." The Great Northern workers responded to the appeal by pledging their full support to the union.

The American Railway Union then sent a letter to the Great Northern lines warning that unless pay cuts were ended and the wage level raised, a strike would be called. The letter went so far as to set the date for the strike—April 13, 1894.

In frantic haste, Hill issued instructions to his managers to appeal to the men to remain loyal to the company. Rapid promotions were promised any worker who would ignore the A.R.U. But the strike took place as planned.

Here was no craft union stoppage, affecting only part of the workingmen. Everyone struck—all crafts, all workers regardless of their skill or division of work. With each passing day of the strike, more and more support was demonstrated.

The Great Northern Railway was at a standstill. The idea of "one big union" was working!

As days dragged on, the anxious James J. Hill summoned his managers for a conference with the leaders of the A.R.U. Faces were drawn and tense. Feelings were high. Hill suggested arbitration rather than meeting the demands of the strikers.

Short, squat, bush-bearded, Hill was a former clerk who had risen to the position of an owner of a railroad. With the panic of 1873, the St. Paul and Pacific Railroad failed.

In 1878 Hill and his associates bought the bonds of the railroad for a ridiculously low price. They then reorganized and developed the road into the 4,000 mile Great Northern

system. It was through this railroad and allied enterprises that James J. Hill, the "empire builder," made his fortune. When he died he left \$53,000,000 to his heirs.

While Hill spoke, all was quiet. No one moved; no one uttered a word. When the owner of the Great Northern finished his piece, a tall man in a dark suit arose. It was Eugene V. Debs.

As Debs stood before the group, he glanced for a moment at Hill. Then he began speaking, choosing his words carefully:

"Let me say that we do not accept the proposition. Efforts have been made since this trouble started to divide the organization and make trouble between the Union and the Brotherhoods. I understand such to be the policy of this company. Now if the other organizations represent the men, let them set your wheels turning. Our men will not go back to work . . . They are convinced that their demand is a just one. If their request is not complied with, they will, without regard to consequences, continue this struggle on the lines already laid down and fight it out with all the means at their command within the limits of the law. We understand your position; you understand ours. We will not withdraw from this conference. We shall be in the city several days and shall be glad to receive any further communications from you."

Thus, the strike continued on—ten, eleven, twelve days . . . In the meantime, Hill resorted to government pressure.

Knute Nelson, Governor of the State of Minnesota, summoned Debs to his office. After being kept waiting in the ante-room for some time, Debs was ushered into the Governor's presence.

"Do you wish to see me?" asked Governor Nelson.

"No, Governor," answered Debs. "I do not wish to see you, but you have indicated your wish to see me, and here I am."

"So you are Eugene Debs," said the Governor, looking over the long, lean figure before him. Then, without more ado,

Nelson launched into a long and torrid denunciation of Debs, calling him an "agitator," "foreigner," and "anarchist" whose only objective was "stirring up strife among peaceful and contented workingmen."

When the Governor finished, his face was purple.

"Now, Governor, I have listened to all you have had to say," Debs responded. "Are you through?"

The Governor said that he was.

"Well then," Debs replied, "for the first time in your life look into the eyes of a man. I have never in my life worn the collar of a plutocrat, nor jumped like a jack when he pulled the string as you have done for Mr. Hill. Now, Governor, I know something about railroads, and you may, with my consent, take the B Line and go to hell."

With this Debs left the chamber, leaving Governor Nelson standing speechless in the middle of the room.

The Great Northern strike was finally won. It took eighteen days to do it. The men stayed united and their demands were finally met. The idea of "one big union" had succeeded.

It was the greatest union victory that the nation had seen in years. And when Debs returned home to Terre Haute in May he was met by four thousand people, friends and neighbors. Bands played and a holiday spirit prevailed. He spoke to them at a public park chosen for the occasion.

"... I am glad, my friends, to be able to say to you tonight that in all those eighteen days there was, from one end of the Great Northern road to the other, not a single drop of human blood spilled.

"The American spirit of fair play was uppermost in the minds of the manly men who were involved in the trouble, and their fight for wages was conducted without rowdyism or lawlessness ...

"My glory, my friends, consists in the gladness which I know will be brought into the little cottage homes of the humble

trackmen among the hills in the West. I can almost see the looks of gratitude on the faces of these men's wives and little children.

"In all my life I have never felt so highly honored as I did when leaving St. Paul on my way home. As our train pulled out of the yards the tokens of esteem, which I prize far more highly than all others, was in seeing the old trackmen, men whose frames were bent with years of grinding toil, who receive the pittance of from eighty cents to a dollar a day, leaning on their shovels and lifting their hats to me in appreciation of my humble assistance in a cause which they believed had resulted in a betterment of their miserable existence ..."



## Men Against Slavery

*... a rich plunderer like Pullman is a greater felon than a poor thief ...*

Not two months had passed since the victory of the American Railway Union over the Great Northern Railway—and another strike was at hand. It was to go down in history as the Pullman strike.

George M. Pullman was head of the internationally famous Pullman Palace Car Company. One of ten children, he had gone to work at the age of fourteen, studied at night while employed in a store during the day. By various means, not excluding his own native ability, he established a company to design and manufacture railroad cars. He soon succeeded in so dominating the field that in 1894 Senator Sherman of Ohio declared: "I regard the Pullman Company and the Sugar Trust as the most outrageous monopolies of the day . . ."

Pullman was not only the employer, but also the landlord of more than 5,000 workers who manufactured and repaired cars running on three-fourths of the country's railroad lines. He owned five hundred acres of land in the vicinity of Chicago, three hundred of which he used for his plant. On the remaining two hundred, he decided to conduct an experiment. He built a city for his employees.

Brick tenements, churches, parks, athletic grounds, a library were all there and Mr. Pullman was the only landlord. The town was advertised as a "model" town.

There were no saloons. There were no brothels. Public speakers were not permitted. No union activity was tolerated. This was the town of Pullman.

Actually the town gave George Pullman new means of exploiting his workers. The method used was simple. The cost to the Pullman Company of illuminating gas was only 33 cents a thousand cubic feet. Yet every worker living in Pullman had to pay at the rate of \$2.25 a thousand. And if he wanted to keep his job, he paid the amount and kept quiet. The nearby city of Chicago supplied the Pullman Company with water at four cents a thousand gallons. For this same water, the company charged its employees ten cents a thousand gallons, or about 75 cents a month.

The people in this "model" town were housed in pens called "cottages" built in tight rows. And for these "cottages," they paid high rents. If they put shutters on the windows of their homes, they had to pay extra. Such was the town of Pullman in 1893 when a deep-seated economic depression settled upon the nation.

In the wake of the depression came four million unemployed men and women. So terrible was their plight that huge demonstrations took place in various parts of the country. An army of unemployed even marched on Washington itself. But, while misery stalked the land, big business grew bigger. It was evident to all that the rich were growing richer and the poor were growing poorer.

Popular discontent expressed itself in the increased vote given to the candidates of the People's Party in the Congressional and state elections of 1894, a vote which came to a million and a half. Eugene Debs himself joined the movement of hundreds of thousands of American people in turning their backs on the two older parties. During the Congressional campaign of 1894, he urged support of Populist Party candidates: "I am a Populist," declared Debs, "and I favor wiping out both old parties

so they will never come into power again. I have been a Democrat all my life and I am ashamed to admit it."

It was also an expression of the feeling of the times that more and more railroad workers looked to the American Railway Union and its leader, Debs.

Fresh from victory over James J. Hill, the A.R.U. won the support of an increasing number of workers—and the fear and hatred of the railroads. The growing influence of industrial unions as symbolized by the A.R.U. was a direct threat to the power of big business. This proved particularly true in the case of the Pullman Company. When the panic of 1893 hit, this company possessed assets worth \$62,000,000, of which \$26,000,000 represented undivided profits. Despite this, however, it proceeded to cut wages from 25 to 40 per cent! But there was no reduction in the price of goods sold at company stores or in rents charged for company houses or for gas used in the "model" town of Pullman.

Such a situation caused tremendous resentment. Workers demanded the return of the old scale of wages. The company refused. On May 11, 1894, the workers of Pullman went on strike, a strike described by the United States Commissioner of Labor as "probably the most expensive and far-reaching labor controversy . . . of this generation."

It so happened, as the Pullman strike was getting under way, the first national convention of the American Railway Union was being held in crowded Uhlich's Hall, in Chicago. Four hundred delegates were present at this two-week session representing a membership of some 150,000 railroad workers. Gene Debs, lean and gaunt as ever, at thirty-nine years of age a veteran labor leader, presided. Fired by the justice of the cause of the Pullman workers, A.R.U. officers and rank-and-file members urged the calling of a sympathy strike. But Debs talked against the strike and pointed to obstacles that lay in the path of success.

But the union membership believed otherwise. The strike vote was taken and Debs himself was delegated to assume leadership of the entire strike situation. Debs's first act in his new work was to address a meeting of striking Pullman employees.

"I believe a rich plunderer like Pullman is a greater felon than a poor thief," Debs told the strikers. "You are striking to avert slavery and degradation . . ." Many public-spirited citizens agreed. Great publicity had been focused on the strike from one end of the nation to the other. People read and talked about the stoppage and of Eugene Debs, its leader. And while most of the newspapers howled against Debs and the strikers, a few reflected friendly, sympathetic sentiment. Among these was the New York *Sun* which stated that the people of Pullman "want to run the municipal government themselves . . . according to the ordinary American standard . . ."

The strikers met daily at Turner Hall in nearby Kensington since meetings in the town of Pullman were forbidden. Soon 125,000 railroad workers were on strike.

As a weapon to compel settlement of the strike, the A.R.U. called for a boycott of Pullman trains throughout America. As the response to this call slowly began to be felt, other forces—powerful in nature—swung into action to break the strike. One was the octopus-like General Managers Association, founded eight years before to protect the interests of various railroads running into Chicago. And the Pullman strike served as a good opportunity.

The other force was the United States government itself. The President of the United States at the time was Grover Cleveland, a Democrat who proved to be "safe and sound" for big business.

Cleveland's Attorney-General, later his Secretary of State, was Richard B. Olney, a railroad lawyer. Before taking office, Olney wrote to Charles E. Perkins, president of the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad, asking if it would be "to the

true interests of the C. B. and Q. to become United States Attorney General." The answer was yes.

Olney made an excellent Attorney-General—for the railroads. He conceived of a scheme not only to break the strike but, together with the General Managers Association, he hoped to break the American Railway Union as well. The first part of the plan called for the bringing of Federal troops to Chicago—the nerve center of the strike—to run the trains and terrorize the strikers. But Governor John Altgeld of Illinois, who owed his election to the common people, refused to summon the troops.

It was now up to Olney to find ways of making the use of troops legal and possible. He appointed Edwin Walker, a lawyer in the employ of the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad, to act as his special deputy in Chicago. Walker immediately saw to it that 3,600 men were sworn in as deputy marshals "to preserve order and protect property." These officials were made up, according to later testimony by the Superintendent of the Chicago police, of "thugs, thieves and ex-convicts."

Their purpose was soon evident. While the strike had been peaceful and without incident up to that time, very soon violence flared up. Railroad cars were overturned and burned.

The A.R.U. assigned a special corps of workers to patrol the city to see to it that workers avoided any action that could be called violent. Debs himself counseled peaceful measures. He wrote to his lieutenants in states throughout the country: "Commit no violence. Have every man stand pat. Troops cannot move trains."

Ever present at the strike front, Debs was a constant source of inspiration to the striking workers. Night and day he was available, giving guidance, meeting with committees, helping solve seemingly unsolvable problems, lending his oratorical ability to encourage the strikers and keep up their spirit until the fight was won.

This was what prompted a railroad spokesman to say: "We can handle the other labor leaders, but we cannot handle Debs. We have got to wipe him out . . ."

The next step in the plan of Olney and the General Managers Association was not long in unfolding. It was court action.

On July 2, Federal Judges William A. Woods and Peter S. Grosscup of the Northern District of Illinois issued a sweeping court order forbidding Debs and his associates "from in any way or manner interfering with, hindering, obstructing or stopping" any business activity of twenty-two railroads. The court order, called an "injunction," was the most sweeping ever issued by a Federal Court. It charged Debs and other A.R.U. leaders with conspiracy—hindering the delivery of United States mail.

When the injunction order was read by United States Marshal J. W. Arnold to a group of workers at the Rock Island tracks, there was hooting and jeering and some good-natured jostling. This was cause enough for the next step in the plan.

"An emergency has arisen," said the court, and certification of the emergency was rushed to Washington where it was presented to President Cleveland's cabinet. This was what Olney had been waiting for.

Despite Governor Altgeld, despite the Mayor of Chicago who personally gave a large financial contribution to the strikers, despite the peaceful nature of the strike, Federal troops were rushed to Chicago "to preserve law and order."

And on July 4, Independence Day, the first troops, the entire command of Fort Sheridan, rode into Chicago. Newspapers all over the country carried screaming headlines: Troops Sent to Quell Rioting; Cleveland Acts; Civil War?

Nevertheless, despite the incitements of most of the newspapers, public sentiment was friendly to the strikers, many newsboys going as far as to throw their papers into the gutter rather than distribute misleading information about the strike.

The moving of trains by armed men began.

On July 5, Governor Altgeld, of whom Debs was to say: "He was genuine, he was true, he could look God and man straight in the eye," protested the use of Federal troops illegally and without his request.

Then followed four days of terror. Troops fired into crowds, killing and wounding scores. Streets actually ran red with the blood of striking workers and their families and their friends. The headquarters of the American Railway Union was broken into and records seized.

By this time, with more than 11,000 men under arms and over 3,000 policemen on duty, President Cleveland issued a proclamation banning public assemblages of any kind.

Debs, trying desperately to turn back the attack, ignored the court injunction and issued an appeal to the workers of Chicago for a general strike. When the strike finally got under way leaders of the American Federation of Labor, among them Samuel Gompers, let it be known that they would not participate. Thus they actually helped break the strike. Their stand was duplicated by the do-nothing leadership of the Railroad Brotherhoods.

Thus unaided, the striking members of the American Railway Union faced the concerted attack of government and industry.

At this crucial hour, Debs and other A.R.U. leaders were arrested, charged, not with conspiracy, but with "contempt of court." On July 17 they were imprisoned in the Cook County jail where they remained for six days.

Meanwhile the strike was reaching its crisis. In order to return to the strike, Debs and the other A.R.U. leaders reluctantly offered bail and were released. Later denied a trial by jury and an unbiased hearing, they were judged guilty of contempt and sentenced to six months in the county jail.

"There is not a scrap of testimony to show that one of us violated any law whatsoever," Debs said later in a public statement. "If we are guilty of conspiracy, why are we punished

for contempt? I would a thousand times rather be held accountable for the strike than for the decision."

The decision was promptly appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, Debs had still to face trial for "conspiracy." With every agency of government against them, the full force of industry organized to destroy their union, and their leaders condemned to prison, the strikers were forced to return to work. The Pullman strike was over. It had been lost and the American Railway Union suffered a defeat from which it never recovered.

But, as Debs said, "No strike has ever been lost, and there can be no defeat for the labor movement."



## You Can't Jail an Idea

*... in the gleam of every bayonet ... the class struggle was revealed.*

The strike of the American Railway Union against the Pullman Company was over. The workers were forced back to work, their leaders arrested, their union routed.

Meanwhile Eugene Debs, already sentenced to six months in jail for contempt of court, was awaiting further trial on the charge of conspiracy. At the end of January, 1895, the trial began before Judge Grosscup in the U. S. Federal Court in Chicago. A feeling approaching a lynch spirit was in the air. Not a single worker was on the jury. And whenever the defense, led by the noted attorney, Clarence Darrow, sought to introduce testimony revealing the economic and social background of the case, it was overruled by the Court.

Debs, appearing before the Court, seemed far removed from the fiery labor "agitator" pictured in the press of the nation. Calm, bespectacled, almost bald, his mild blue eyes seeming more gentle than militant, Debs gave a different impression from what the prosecution sought to present to the jury.

The star witness for the state was Wallace De Groot Rice, the labor reporter for the Chicago *Herald*. Rice sought to prove that Debs counseled the use of force and violence in the Pullman strike. But when Attorney Darrow brought out the fact that the newspaper reporter had received a railroad pass from the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul railroad, testimony given was largely discredited.

On February 6, 1895, Debs himself took the stand. He denied that he had ever advocated the use of violence, broken the law or advised others to do so.

Prosecutor Walker asked many questions: "The purpose of your Union was to get control of all the railroad employes in the hands of the American Railway Union, was it not?"

"Yes sir, under the limitations of the Constitution and By-Laws," answered Debs.

Referring to the Great Northern strike, the Prosecutor asked if intimidation had been used.

"No sir," answered Debs, "we simply went home and stayed there."

Then Debs was asked to define the word "strike."

"A strike is a stoppage of work at a given time by men acting in concert in order to redress some real or imaginary grievance," Debs replied.

"Mr. Debs, will you define the meaning of the word 'scab'?"

"A scab in labor unions," answered Debs, "means the same as a traitor to his country. It means a man who betrays his fellowmen by taking their places when they go on strike for a principle . . ."

The defense sought to call George Pullman to the stand. A United States deputy marshal informed the Court that he had tried to find Pullman but could not locate him. "Nobody seems to know the exact whereabouts of that gentleman," he said.

But news of Pullman's whereabouts leaked out. He had gone East, simply attaching his private car to a New York train. The Court declared it would deal drastically with Mr. Pullman if he could be found. Thereupon, Pullman returned, "went into chambers, made a few personal explanations," and that was the last heard about the matter.

"Had it been myself," commented Debs, "I would have to go to jail. That is the difference."

Not even the government could induce other officials of the Pullman Company to testify.

Meanwhile, a juror fell sick. Judge Grosscup grasped the opportunity to adjourn further taking of testimony. On February 12, the Judge discharged the jury and ordered the trial to be held over until the first Monday in May. The case was never called up. Debs was deeply disappointed. He was sure he would have been acquitted.

In support of this belief was the action of members of the jury who eagerly sought Debs out after the trial, shook him warmly by the hand and told him, that in their opinion, the entire case was nothing but a frame-up.

Thus the charge of "conspiracy" against Debs failed to be substantiated, and the case died there.

But, on May 27, 1895, the United States Supreme Court upheld the contempt sentences originally imposed on Debs and other A.R.U. leaders. And so, though the charge of "conspiracy" had fallen through by default, Debs was still forced to spend six months behind prison bars.

"I shall abide by the decision with perfect composure," he said, "confidently believing that it will hasten the day of public ownership, not only of the railroads, but of all other public utilities. I view it as the death knell of the wage system. In the long view this decision will prove a blessing to this country."

"In going to jail for participation in the late strike," said Eugene V. Debs, "[I] have no apologies to make nor regrets to express . . . I would not change places with Judge Woods, and if it is expected that six months, or even six years in jail will purge me of contempt, the punishment will fail of its purpose."

When Debs arrived at Woodstock prison, where he was to serve his sentence, there were those who wanted to lynch him for the part he had played in the Pullman strike. Some of them were farmers who, under the influence of anti-union propaganda, held the railroad workers, rather than the railroad

owners, responsible for delaying the trains and the consequent non-shipment of their products.

Large sections of the American people, however, reacted differently. The organized labor movement for one was fully aroused, for it was keenly aware of what this meant in terms of future strike-breaking.

During Debs's stay in jail, President Cleveland was compelled by public opinion to appoint a commission to look into the causes of the Pullman strike. The commission heard hundreds of witnesses and later published a well-documented report of many pages.

This report made it clear that "many impartial observers [were] reaching the view" that much of the blame for the disorders rested squarely on the government "for not adequately controlling monopolies and corporations, and failing to reasonably protect the rights of labor and redress its wrongs." The report further declared that responsibility for violence during the strike rested with the 3,600 United States deputy marshals and not with the officials of the American Railway Union.

But Debs served his sentence to the end. Upon his entrance into jail, Debs, as a "political prisoner," was assured by Sheriff Eckert that he had no intention of treating him like an ordinary prisoner. He and the other A.R.U. leaders were permitted to receive guests, presents, and letters. In one two-week period Debs received as many as 1,500 letters that came from people all over the United States. Mrs. Debs, who had closed up their family home in Terre Haute and was living at Woodstock, helped her husband answer the huge correspondence.

There were many visitors, too, including prominent citizens of this country and Europe. Little Nellie Bly, famous for her amazing trip around the world in the record time of seventy-two days, visited Debs, as did Keir Hardie, labor leader of Great Britain.

Books and pamphlets were sent him from progressive-

mindful and sympathetic people throughout the country. Debs read, analyzed, and thought. Among the books given him were Karl Marx's *Capital* and other writings dealing with socialist ideas, gifts of Victor L. Berger, later to be elected to Congress from Milwaukee on the Socialist Party ticket.

When Debs finally left Woodstock jail in November, 1895, so impressed were the prisoners with his kindness that they presented him with a testimonial which they all had signed. It read:

"We, the undersigned inmates of Woodstock Jail, desire to convey to you our heartfelt thanks and gratitude for the many acts of kindness and sympathy shown to us by you during your incarceration in this institution.

"We selfishly regret your departure from here into the outer world and scenes of labor. Your presence here has been to us what an oasis in a desert is to the tired and weary traveler, or a ray of sunshine showing through a rift in the clouds. With thousands of others we rejoice and extend to you our most earnest congratulations upon your restoration to liberty. Hoping you may have a long, prosperous and happy life, success in all your undertakings, especially the 'American Railway Union,' we all join in wishing you Godspeed and beg to subscribe ourselves, your friends."

Just before Debs was scheduled to be released from jail, a committee of Chicago workingmen invited all "liberty-loving citizens" to attend a reception at Battery D, Chicago, as a "testimony of their sympathy with Mr. Debs and his colleagues in their unjust and unlawful imprisonment and as an expression of popular aversion to judicial despotism and devotion to civil and constitutional liberty."

The invitation was accepted by tens of thousands of people.

The jail was surrounded by cheering men, women, and children including local farm people. The special train from Woodstock to Chicago was a scene of joy and celebration.

When the train pulled into Chicago, despite bad weather,

100,000 cheering people gave Debs a tremendous ovation. In describing the tumultuous scene, the *Chicago Chronicle* wrote:

"Whichever way the labor leader turned there was a fresh outburst of cheers but so great was the crowd that it remained wedged together. No one could move. The police cried in vain, but they could hardly hear their own voices . . . Those who were near enough reached out to touch the leader's garments and those who were not were madly striving to do so.

"The men who were bearing Debs on their shoulders had not gone ten paces from the car when they could go no farther. From every direction the crowd faced toward their idol. Men cried for air and egress from the pressing mass, but no one heard them. The policemen were as powerless as everyone else . . .

"The slender form of the man whose presence brought out the outpouring was all the while held aloft and safe from the crush . . . Never did men strive and struggle so to demonstrate their love for a fellowman just released from a convict's cell . . .

"The procession that marched through the storm was composed of the members of every Trade Union in the city, wearing badges and marching in his honor."

Said the *Chicago Evening Press*: "It is idle to say that Eugene V. Debs has lost the esteem of the masses. No such demonstration as was made in his honor yesterday and last night has been seen in this city for many years, if at all."

The next day, on his return home with his wife and brother to Terre Haute, Debs was met with an enthusiastic though smaller demonstration and was escorted home by several hundred miners preceded by the Coal Bluff band. That night the people of Terre Haute invited Debs to speak to them in the Armory.

" . . . There is something wrong in this country," said Debs to his fellow townspeople. "The judicial nets are so adjusted as to catch the minnows and let the whales slip through and

the Federal judge is as far removed from the common people as if he inhabited another planet . . ."

Debs was a free man again. But the American Railway Union was scattered to the winds. The General Managers Association, taking advantage of the jailing of Debs and his associates, hounded every A.R.U. man from the railroads through a systematic method of blacklisting.

No sooner was Debs released from jail than he devoted himself wholeheartedly to the task of rebuilding the A.R.U. One of the first things he did was to pay the union's debts out of money he had received on the lecture platform. He also went around the country to encourage and help as much as possible men who still held fast to the union. And more than once he was followed by the detectives of the railroad companies.

But the Debs who emerged from jail was not the same man who had gone in. A new idea—that of socialism—was beginning to take hold of him.

Socialism was not new to America. During the first half of the nineteenth century, "utopian" socialist colonies had been established in this country. The second half saw the introduction of scientific socialism based on the teachings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

With the collapse of the German democratic movement of 1848 and 1849, a number of working-class radicals came to America. Among them was Joseph Weydemeyer, a friend of Marx, who enlisted in the Union army at the outbreak of the Civil War and was retired with the rank of Brigadier-General.

Weydemeyer, who helped organize trade unions in this country and stressed the need for independent political action, remained a regular correspondent of Marx and did much to spread the ideas of scientific socialism here.

Marx himself was a regular contributor to the columns of the *New York Daily Tribune*, then under the editorship of Horace Greeley and Charles Dana.

Under Marx's leadership, the International Workingmen's Association was established in London in 1864. This organization, which influenced the international working-class movement for the next decade, had the support of labor groups in Europe and in America.

In 1877 the Socialist Labor Party, growing out of earlier Socialist groupings, was organized in this country and in 1892 it entered its first Presidential election, securing 21,000 votes for its candidate. By 1894, the year of the Pullman strike, the Socialist Labor Party had polled 30,000 votes in the national elections.

Up to this time, Debs himself had heard little of socialism. Then came the Pullman strike—and the use of Federal troops, injunctions, and armed thugs.

"At this juncture," Debs writes, "there were delivered, from wholly unexpected quarters, a swift succession of blows that blinded me for an instant and then opened wide my eyes—and in the gleam of every bayonet and the flash of every rifle *the class struggle was revealed*. This was my first practical lesson in socialism, though wholly unaware that it was called by that name . . ."

At that time Debs called it the "Cooperative Commonwealth." "Above all, what is the duty of American workingmen whose liberties have been placed in peril?" wrote Debs in a letter to a magazine that appeared the day following his release from prison. "There is nothing in our government [the ballot] cannot remove or amend. It can make and unmake presidents and congresses and courts . . . It can sweep over trusts, syndicates, corporations, monopolies and every other abnormal development of the money power designed to abridge the liberties of workingmen and enslave them by the degradation incident to poverty and enforced idleness as cyclones scatter the leaves of our forests. The ballot can do all this and more. It can give our civilization its crowning glory—the Cooperative Commonwealth."

## Debs for President

*The Rockefellers have the dollars, but we have the votes.*

On January 1, 1897, Eugene V. Debs sat down and wrote a letter to the membership of the once powerful American Railway Union.

"The issue is Socialism versus Capitalism. I am for Socialism because I am for humanity. We have been cursed with the reign of gold long enough. Money constitutes no proper basis for civilization. The time has come to regenerate society—we are on the eve of a universal change."

Thus was the "roar" of the conflict against the Great Northern Railway and the Pullman Company bearing fruit. Debs announced himself a Socialist.

If the working people of America were not Socialists at the time, they were showing increasing opposition to big business influences in the two older parties.

"The labor organizations are against us to a man," wrote an advisor to Mark Hanna, Republican boss. But the carefully cultivated Republican boom for William McKinley for President of the United States was not to be headed off. Rather than support McKinley, large sections of the small folk of the country turned hopefully to a young giant from the west, William Jennings Bryan, running on both the Democratic and Populist party tickets. Bryan brought with him to his campaign

for the Presidency outstanding oratorical ability and a cure-all for the country's ills.

This cure-all involved opening the mints of the United States to the unlimited coinage of silver at the established legal ratio of 16 to 1. It was a little understood but attractive slogan. The gold of the country was obviously in the hands of a favored few, the giant corporations and Wall Street. Small wonder that many people saw in the Bryan platform a way out for the poverty-stricken and the oppressed. Bryan spoke with sincere conviction and, at least, he voiced the hopes, fears, and problems of the small farmers, the small business people and the workers. In 1896 Eugene Debs, out of jail less than a year, backed Bryan on the Populist ticket.

"I supported Mr. William Jennings Bryan . . . not because I regarded the free coinage of silver as a panacea for our national ills," said Debs later, "but because I believed that the triumph of Mr. Bryan and free silver would blunt the fangs of the money power. . ."

During the campaign Debs took the stump for Bryan, much to the consternation of some of the candidate's lieutenants.

"I was talking straight industrial unionism," Debs recalled years later, "and some of Bryan's lieutenants didn't like it. They said I was directing more attention to myself through my speeches delivered direct to the workers than was Bryan with his free silver panacea."

As the campaign progressed, big business became increasingly fearful of the outcome. But Mark Hanna proved equal to the task. With great skill and ability, he collected campaign funds from banks, insurance companies, railroads, and industrial corporations estimated at over \$16,000,000. And when the votes were counted, Bryan was defeated by a margin of less than 600,000 votes.

Big business celebrated and breathed a sigh of relief.

As a result of this Bryan campaign, Debs became interested in



a new form of political activity which was to be born at the death of the American Railway Union.

The failure of the Pullman strike of 1894, the jailing of its principal leaders, and the widespread use of the "blacklist" against its members combined to reduce greatly the ranks of the A.R.U. However, a solid core of workers still clung to the organization and its leader Debs who was convinced that, if the best interests of the working people were to be advanced, they would have to organize not only on the economic but also the political front. And so the A.R.U. officially voted itself out of existence, but together with another group centering around two socialist publications, *The Coming Nation* and *The Appeal to Reason*, it formed the Social Democracy of America in 1897. The organization was designed to advance the cause of socialism.

As Debs put it, "The American Railway Union was defeated but not conquered—overwhelmed but not destroyed. It lives and pulsates in the Socialist movement, and its defeat but blazed the way to economic freedom and hastened the dawn of human brotherhood."

Soon after the Social Democracy was formed, a split occurred within its ranks. With a majority of its members more inclined to utopian schemes of colonization than to political action, Debs and Berger, leader of the Social Democracy in Wisconsin, left the organization to found the Social Democratic Party of America.

In 1900 the new party joined with other socialist groups including those which had left the Socialist Labor Party and decided to place a Presidential candidate in the field. It looked in the direction of the party's outstanding champion and most popular leader, Eugene Debs.

A nationally known celebrity by virtue of his active role in A.R.U. struggles, Debs was respected and admired by thousands of people, many of whom did not understand or accept his socialist ideas.

Writing to a friend, Debs said: "I wish no office, no honors—empty baubles all. When my days are ended, I shall have enjoyed the love of those capable of appreciating a man who is true to himself, and that is enough." But he was prevailed upon to accept the nomination.

And thus Debs became a candidate for President of the United States, the first of his five campaigns for election to that office. A former Socialist Labor Party leader, Job Harriman of California, was the vice-presidential candidate.

When the election returns were in, it was found that Debs had received 95,000 votes and Malloney of the Socialist Labor Party 33,000 votes—in all 128,000 socialist votes.

In 1901, the Socialist Party of America was officially launched, its guiding principle being the transformation of "the present system of private ownership of the means of production and distribution into collective ownership by the entire people."

This Socialist Party was destined to grow into a party with members in every state in the union, members who were for the most part working people organized into trade unions affiliated with the A. F. of L.

Many of the important unions of the day including those in the building, printing, mining, clothing, and metal trades were largely built by Socialists who also were in positions of leadership in these unions and regularly represented them at A. F. of L. conventions.

In the years between 1900 and 1904, Debs's activity was largely confined to the lecture platform, bringing the message of the need for economic and political organization to the people by means of his splendid oratorical ability. He urged people to organize into unions for economic reasons and into the Socialist Party for political reasons. What time he did not spend working for the Socialist Party, Debs put in as organizer for various unions throughout the country. He also developed as the nation's outstanding socialist pamphleteer and contributor to the many new labor and socialist newspapers.



"The Sower," by Art Young.

*Art Young, famous cartoonist, was a close friend of Gene Debs and one of his admirers. Speaking of Debs, Young wrote: "Crowds greeted him wherever he went. It was plain to see that he wanted to embrace every human being, man, woman, and child, and encourage them." The above is one of Young's better known sketches of Debs.*

It was inevitable that in 1904 the Socialist Party should again choose him for its Presidential candidate. In accepting the nomination, Debs told the party convention that although personally he would have preferred "to remain in the ranks," he was nevertheless ready to bow to "the collective will" of the delegates.

Debs's running mate was Benjamin Hanford, a printer from New York who created the character "Jimmy Higgins," the industrious rank-and-filer who does all the hard, unromantic chores in the organization but seldom receives much credit for the work done. Opposing Debs in the two other parties were Theodore Roosevelt, Republican successor to the assassinated William McKinley, and Judge Alton B. Parker, Democrat.

In his campaign for the Presidency, Debs visited every state and territory in the Union. Sometimes he would deliver as many as ten speeches in the course of one day. And everywhere people turned out to hear him.

As a speaker, Debs was superb, one of the foremost orators of the day. Tall, gaunt, simple and modest, he reminded men of Lincoln. John Swinton, the noted journalist, who had heard Abraham Lincoln speak at Cooper Union in New York City in 1860, had this to say upon hearing Debs thirty-four years later:

"I recalled the appearance, the manner, the voice and the speech of Lincoln as Debs stood before me . . . It seemed to me that both men were imbued with the same spirit . . . Lincoln spoke for man; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for right and progress; so spoke Debs. Lincoln spoke for the freedom of labor; so spoke Debs. Lincoln was the foe of human slavery; so is Debs. . ."

Hearing Debs was an experience. People came miles to listen to one of his speeches. His voice was deep and vibrant. On the platform he would frequently gesticulate with his

large lean right hand, his fingers extended and separated, his thumb far back.

He would pace up and down while speaking and lean far over the platform as if seeking to be as close as possible to his audience. Reaching out with his long, bony finger and, with his blue eyes ablaze, it would appear to the listener that Debs was speaking directly to him.

Following in the tradition of the nation's great orators, men like Daniel Webster, Wendell Phillips, and Robert Ingersoll, Debs appealed to both the head and the heart of the nation. But it was primarily to the heart that he directed his words.

While not exactly like the evangelist popular during his day, Debs had something of that quality. He was able to hold his listeners spellbound for hours on end.

In describing his gift of oratory, Debs said: "The secret of efficient expression in oratory . . . is in having something efficient to express . . . The choice of words is not important . . . No man ever made a great speech on a mean subject . . ."

People turned out to hear Debs speak not only because he was a splendid orator and a magnetic personality. There was also great interest and curiosity in his socialist message.

The times were uneasy. An increasingly large number of people—workers, farmers and small businessmen—were becoming more and more alarmed by the concentration of economic power in the hands of the giant monopolies of the country. The vast developing wealth of America was being harnessed to man's will. But only a few men were reaping the profits from this wealth.

"The Rockefellers have the dollars," Debs said, "but we have the votes. And when we have the sense enough to know how to use the votes, we will have not only the votes, but the dollars for all the children of men."

He vigorously denounced the cry of "no politics in the union" or "dragging the union into politics" as born of ignorance or dishonesty. The cry, he said, was "echoed by every

ward-heeling politician in the country . . . to deceive and mislead the workers. . ."

Debs was convinced of the need of independent political action on the part of the working people of the country. To him there was no great difference between the Democratic and Republican parties both as to purpose and program, although he recognized the fact that within both older parties there were progressive people. Convinced that both major parties represented big business, he sought to rally support for a third party which would represent the urgent needs of the common people. This explains why Debs supported the People's Party of the 1890's and why later he played a leading role in the Socialist Party. Like progressive-minded people later on, he saw a third-party movement or independent political action as urgently needed and in line with the best traditions of American freedom.

While Debs personally loathed "the game of politics as it is understood and played under the capitalist rules," he nevertheless thoroughly believed in the need for political action. As he put it: "So long as the government, including the courts, the soldiers, the police and private armies of thugs, gunmen and man-killers, are in the control of the master class, all . . . strikes will be fought under great disadvantages and all the power of the master class rule will be used to defeat them and keep them in slavery . . ."

Accordingly, he called upon the workers of the country to make themselves heard politically. "The united vote of those who toil and have not," he said, "will vanquish those who have and toil not, and solve forever the problems of democracy."

From September 1 to election day, Debs swung around the circuit. He spoke every day, missed no appointments, and, according to a friend who accompanied him, the crowds were so large in the big cities that on "several occasions it became

necessary for him to stop and speak a few minutes to the waiting thousands in the streets. . ."

Unlike the candidates of the two older parties, Debs's funds were limited. He had to attend to his own baggage, hotel accommodations, and vast correspondence. There were no brass bands, Pullman trains, and torch-light parades. But the meetings at which Debs spoke were well attended despite the fact that people had to buy tickets of admission. The crowds were enthusiastic.

Yet, "most of the great capitalist newspapers," according to one observer, "either ignored these meetings or belittled them, or flatly misrepresented them . . ."

Finally, when the campaign ended and the votes were counted, it was found that Debs and the Socialist Party had over 400,000 votes, more than four times the number received in the 1900 campaign.

Theodore Roosevelt was elected President. The big Debs vote was a tribute to the growing influence of the message of socialism from one end of the nation to the other.

## Fresh Air in Old Unions

*There is but one hope and that is the economic and political solidarity of the working class.*

"The industrial union," said Debs, "is the forerunner of industrial democracy. In the shop where the workers are associated is where industrial democracy has its beginning. Organize according to your industries! . . . United and acting together for the common good your power is invincible."

Eugene Debs was a fighter for a united trade union movement. He hated disunity and division among the people who, he realized, must work together for their own benefit.

*Unity of the working people!* It was a simple idea. And Debs believed in it. Accordingly, he opposed the basic idea of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, who held that workers should be organized along craft lines in "pure and simple" unions interested solely in economic matters.

To Debs the "pure and simple" trade union of the past did not answer the requirements of the day, and those who insisted that it did were "blind to the changes going on about them, and out of harmony with the progressive forces of the age."

"The attempt to preserve the 'autonomy' of each trade," wrote Debs, "and segregate it within its own independent jurisdiction, while the lines which once separated them are being obliterated, and the trades are being interwoven and interlocked in the process of industrial evolution, is as futile

as to declare and attempt to enforce the independence of the waves of the sea.

"A modern industrial plant has a hundred trades and parts of trades represented in its working force. To have these workers parcelled out to a hundred unions is to divide and not to organize them, to give them over to factions and petty leadership and leave them an easy prey to the machinations of the enemy. . . .

"The attempt of each trade to maintain its own independence separately and apart from others results in increasing jurisdictional entanglements, and is fruitful of dissension, strife and ultimate disruption."

In a speech delivered in South Chicago in 1905, Debs virtually repeated the same idea:

"The simple fact is that industrial conditions have undergone such a complete change that now the trade union, instead of uniting the workers, divides them, incites craft jealousy, breeds dissension and promotes strife—the very things the capitalists desire; for so long as the working class is divided, the capitalists will be secure in their dominion of the earth and the seas; and the millions of toilers will remain in subjection."

Thus did Debs assail the old, disruptive idea of craft unionism. He proposed to replace it by a newer and more all-embracing idea: industrial unionism. He wanted to see *all* workers, regardless of skill or sex or color, organized along industrial lines. Only in this way, he reasoned, could the vast majority of American workers, excluded by the craft union policies of the A. F. of L., become members of trade unions.

Anticipating the C. I. O. movement of the 1930's, Debs urged the formation of large industrial unions to unite skilled and non-skilled workers, men and women, white and Negro, for their own protection.

"I believe," he declared, "in making every effort . . . to promote industrial unionism among the workers and to have

them all united into one economic organization. To accomplish this I would encourage industrial independent organization, especially among the millions who have not as yet been organized at all . . ."

Organize the unorganized! This was the message which Debs brought to the countless meetings he was called upon to address. When he spoke, he made use of every fiber of his long, lean body, straining to bring his message to the minds and hearts of his audience. No wonder at the conclusion of many a meeting, he found himself completely exhausted, emotionally and physically.

Debs also used his magnificent voice to fight against every form of discrimination and division based on nationality, race, or creed. "In dealing with human beings I know no race, no color and no creed," he said.

On all of these major principles Debs ran into head-on collision with the conservative trade union leadership of the time. Under the guidance of Samuel Gompers, the American Federation of Labor followed a "craft" form of unionism, frequently with discriminatory regulations against Negroes, foreigners and women.

Independent political action was frowned upon. Instead, co-operation with political hacks in both parties was the order of the day, under the high-sounding slogan of "rewarding one's friends and punishing one's enemies." Co-operation with big business was also the accepted practice, rather than the militant class struggle of an earlier period.

Since Debs took an opposite position on all of these questions, a conflict between him and the old-line leadership of the A. F. of L. was inevitable. And, as usual, Debs took the offensive.

The main target of his attack were those in the American Federation of Labor who were in control.

In 1902, Debs wrote in the *International Socialist Review*: "I am the friend, not the enemy of the American Federation of Labor. I would conserve, not destroy it. I am opposed not to



the organization or its members, many of whom are personal friends, but to those who are restraining its evolution and preventing it from fulfilling its true mission."

Because he wanted to conserve the American Federation of Labor, he was unsparing in his criticism of its shortcomings. Speaking in 1905, he declared, "The American Federation of Labor is now holding its annual convention in the city of Pittsburgh. What are the delegates doing? Simply passing the same old resolutions.

"Once more they are going to petition Congress to enact an eight-hour law. They have done that over and over again, and their petition has been as repeatedly pigeon-holed. They have also resolved to petition Congress to restrict the powers of the capitalist courts in dealing with labor. They have done that time and again, and what have they gained by it? Absolutely nothing.

"No attention has been paid to their servile supplications. They have been disregarded, thrown aside, treated with contempt; but the delegates solemnly meet in convention once more to pass the same hoary resolutions, to introduce the same stale petitions, with the same inevitable results.

"Now, is not this a perfectly stupid procedure? Are these men incapable of profiting by experience? Do they not by this time understand the nature and essential functions of capitalist-class government? Can they not see that we have a capitalist-class Congress, and capitalist-class legislatures, elected in every instance by . . . a working class, kept ignorant, designedly, in the name of unionism, and with the aid of labor lieutenants of the capitalist class? . . .

"They were elected to serve the masters. And they are serving them . . ."

But, warned Debs, "when the working class is united there will be a lot of jobless labor leaders . . ."

To Debs the best way to advance "the true interests of the

working class" was to recognize the existence of a conflict of interests between the worker and the employer.

Writing in 1904, Debs explained the basis for the conflict as follows:

"The prime consideration in the present industrial system is profit. All other things are secondary. Profit is the lifeblood of capital . . . Only when the capitalist can exact a satisfactory profit from his labor power is the worker given a job, or allowed to work at all. Profit first; labor, life, love, liberty—all these things take second place."

In the *Appeal to Reason*, Socialist weekly published in Girard, Kansas, which had a nationwide circulation, and to which Debs was a constant contributor, he wrote:

"The capitalists want the big end in the way of profits and the workers want more wages and this is why these two classes are at war with each other and 'class is arrayed against class.'"

This idea was completely opposed to the ideas held by Samuel Gompers. Believing in the theory that labor and capital could collaborate peacefully, Gompers became vice-president of the National Civic Federation founded in 1901.

This organization, as powerful in its day as the National Association of Manufacturers was to become at a later period, numbered among its members August Belmont, the banker; Andrew Carnegie, retired steelmaster; and Marcus A. Hanna, millionaire national boss of the Republican Party. The National Civic Federation, "dedicated to the fostering of harmony between organized capital and organized labor," sought to check the rising discontent of the working people of the country by popularizing the idea that the best interest of workers lay in the prosperity and wealth of big business.

To Eugene Debs, the National Civic Federation represented everything that was evil. As he put it: "This Federation is supposed to be fair and impartial. But its only purpose is by subtle schemes to reduce the trade-union movement to harmless

impotency . . . It is for this and this alone that the Civic Federation has been organized . . ."

Debs took the American Federation of Labor to task for its connections with the National Civic Federation. To him this association proved that the A. F. of L. was "not organized to advance the true interests of the working class . . ." The only way to further those "true interests," Debs insisted, was by recognizing the existence of a class struggle and organizing on that basis.

"*We* insist," he declared, "that there *is* a class struggle; that the working class must recognize it; that they must organize economically and politically upon the basis of that struggle; and that when they do so organize they will then have the power to free themselves and put an end to that struggle forever."

## A New Kind of Union

*We are to get together and fight and win together for all.*

Debs not only spoke but worked for industrial unionism based on the class struggle. He served as special organizer for the Western Federation of Miners and the United Mine Workers. Wherever he could he lent a hand to assist in the organizing of the unorganized.

And he was a successful organizer too. Workers liked to listen to him speak, had confidence in his message, and drew courage from him.

"It was a tough job," Debs recalled later, "and many was the time that I knew I was taking my life in my hands by attempting to form labor unions . . ."

Invited to help organize the miners of Cripple Creek, Colorado, who were struggling to obtain an eight-hour day, Debs found the town packed with armed thugs instructed "to shoot all labor agitators on sight." Informed by the sheriff and his deputies that he would not be allowed to speak that night, Debs simply said: "This will either be the beginning of organized labor in Colorado or the end of me."

That night he made his speech.

The next morning, while standing with some other union men near his hotel, he was told that a big hulking fellow, with two guns protruding from his hip pockets, was standing not more than ten feet away and was watching his every move.

Debs walked over to the man, extended his hand, and asked him whether he was watching him.

"Yes, Mr. Debs. I've been watching you pretty carefully. I knew that they were out to get you in this here burg. I hail from Vincennes, Indiana, and I know you're on the level with the workingmen. I just made up my mind that any ——— who laid his dirty hands on you would be carted out of this here region a corpse."

"The fellow blushed to the roots of his hair like a girl when I thanked him for the personal service he had rendered me..."

This was the West that Debs knew in the early days of the trade union movement. It was the same West that gave birth in 1905 to a new type of labor organization called the Industrial Workers of the World.

Debs was unable to find a place for himself in the A. F. of L. because he wanted to organize the unorganized, to bring the vast millions of lowly paid, unskilled working people into the ranks of unions. So he and other progressive labor leaders were compelled to go outside of the Federation to form new and militant unions.

The I.W.W., a so-called "dual" organization, was actually forced into being by the reactionary policies of the A. F. of L. top leadership.

It was natural for Debs to take a leading part in this new organization. For it was he who had helped carry on the fight against what was termed the "class collaboration" of the older unions.

On the evening of January 2, 1905, Debs was present at a conference in Chicago called "to discuss ways and means of uniting the working people of America in correct revolutionary principles."

Said the manifesto as adopted:

"Through employers' associations, they seek to crush with brutal force, by the injunctions of the judiciary and the use of military power, all efforts at resistance . . .

"Or when the other policy seems more profitable, they conceal their daggers beneath the Civic Federation and hoodwink and betray those whom they would rule and exploit. . . ."

Almost six months later a constitutional convention, called "The Continental Congress of the Working Class," was held at Brand's Hall, Chicago. There were 200 delegates from 34 local, state, district and national organizations. The memberships of the represented bodies came to a little less than 150,000. Among the leading groups present were the Western Miners Federation, the American Labor Union, the United Metal Workers, and the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance.

The hall was filled with spectators. On the platform were such veteran labor leaders as William D. Haywood, Daniel De Leon, head of the Socialist Labor Party, Lucy Parsons, wife of the Haymarket martyr, Mother Jones, beloved union organizer, and Eugene Debs. Haywood, as secretary of the Western Federation of Miners, which was the backbone of the new organization, acted as the convention's chairman. This colorful figure, who had heard Debs speak on socialism at the 1901 convention of the miners' union and who later became a Socialist, was in a quandary as to how to begin.

"As I exchanged greetings with them [Debs and Mother Jones]," Haywood later recalled, "I turned over in my mind how I should open the convention. I recalled that during the French Commune the workers had addressed each other as 'fellow citizens,' but here there were many workers who were not citizens of the country, so that would not do. I didn't want to use the old trade union form, 'brothers and sisters,' so, picking up a piece of board that lay on the platform and using it for a gavel, I opened the convention with 'fellow workers.'"

During the course of the convention Debs took the floor:

"They charge us with being assembled here for the purpose of disrupting the union movement," he said. "It is already

disrupted. The trade union movement is today under the control of the capitalist class. It is preaching capitalist economics; it is serving capitalist purposes . . . All of the important strikes during the last two or three years have been lost. . .

"There is certainly something wrong with that form of unionism which has its chief support in the press that represents capitalism; something wrong in that form of unionism that forms an alliance with such capitalist combinations as the Civic Federation, whose sole purpose is to chloroform the working class while the capitalist class goes through their pockets. . .

"I believe that it is possible for the delegates here assembled to form a great sound economic organization of the working class based upon the class struggle, that shall be broad enough to embrace every honest worker, yet narrow enough to exclude every faker."

A little later, Debs said of the I. W. W.:

"In the Industrial Workers we have a union large enough to embrace us all; a union organized upon democratic principles recognizing the equal rights of all and extending its benefits equally to all. Industrial Unionism is the principle upon which the Industrial Workers is organized.

"This means actual unity of purpose and action. It means the economic solidarity of our class. It means that the grievance of one is the concern of all; and that from this time forward the craft division is to be eliminated; that we are to get together and fight and win together for all. . ."

The preamble to the Constitution of the Industrial Workers of the World adopted by the convention stated in part that the "working-class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace as long as hunger and want are found among millions of working-people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until all the

toilers come together on the political as well as on the industrial field . . ."

It was this political action clause in the I. W. W. statement of principles which was to be eliminated a few years later in favor of a different type of action. This action was called "direct action" and consisted of the use of such tactics as sabotage. It was this change in principles which caused Debs to term the move a "monstrous blunder."

To him "direct action" could never "appeal to any considerable number of [American workers], while they have the ballot and the right of industrial and political organization."

Because of its change in policy Debs did not remain long in the I. W. W. Both that body and the American Railway Union, with which Debs was earlier associated, were "dual" organizations—set up to rival organizations already established. Although the I. W. W. and the A. R. U. were forced into existence by the conservative policies of top A. F. of L. and Brotherhood officials, they tended to split the ranks of working people. In later years, though Debs remained a sharp critic of what he considered weaknesses in the established trade union movement, he never again took part in a "dual" union.

Even after Debs severed his connections with the I. W. W., he was ever ready to defend it against misrepresentation, as when he paid it the following tribute:

"The press and the pulpit have in every age and every nation been on the side of the exploiting class and the ruling class. That's why the I.W.W. is infamous . . . [The] I.W.W. is fighting the fight of the bottom dog. For the very reason that Gompers is glorified by Wall Street, Bill Haywood is despised by Wall Street."

## The Red Special

*The hosts pour in from all directions—men, women, children and babies, and all of them, including the babies, are up in arms against the capitalist system.*

In 1908, the Socialist Party again selected Debs and Hanford as its candidates to "bring a message of hope to the weary mothers in the sweatshops, the thousands of child slaves in the factories, and to all those who, with tired hands and saddened faces, bear the burdens of the world's work."

The working people of the country needed such "a message of hope," for in 1907 another economic depression had hit the nation, throwing hundreds of thousands of men and women out of work and forcing drastic slashes in wages. The "bankers' panic," as it was called, extended into the Presidential election year, and so stirred up a greater interest in the campaign.

Opposing Debs in 1908 were the Republican William Howard Taft, groomed as successor to Roosevelt, and the Democrat William Jennings Bryan, "boy orator" now grown to manhood.

The main issue in the campaign was what to do about the trusts. Taft's answer was "regulation." Bryan's was "more regulation." Debs' answer was "public ownership."

On May 23, 1908, speaking in Girard, Kansas, the Socialist candidate for president declared:

"As long as a relatively few men own the railroads, the telegraph, the telephone, own the oil fields and the gas fields

and the steel mills and the sugar refineries and the leather tanneries—own, in short, the sources and means of life—they will corrupt our politics, they will enslave the working class, they will impoverish and debase society, they will do all things that are needful to perpetuate their power as the economic masters and political rulers of the people.

"Not until these great agencies are owned by the people can the people hope for any material improvements in their social conditions."

To those who believed they were living in a "free competitive society" Debs said: "Many of you think you are competing. Against whom? Against Rockefeller? About as I would if I had a wheelbarrow and competed with the Sante Fe from here [Girard, Kansas], to Kansas City."

"No successful capitalist wants competition—for himself," commented Debs. "He only wants it for the working class, so that he can buy his labor power at the lowest competitive price in the labor market."

Not long after this speech, Debs received a letter from the president of a Negro organization. To the query of where he stood on the Negro question, he replied:

"The people of your race are entitled to all the rights and opportunities that other races are entitled to, but they have never had them, nor will they ever have them under the administration of either the Republican or Democratic Parties..."

"In this system class rules class . . . [This] is not a race question but a class question, and when the Negroes, the great mass of whom are wage earners . . . understand their true economic and political interests, they will join and support the Socialist Party . . ."

Thus Eugene Debs attacked practices of discrimination against the Negro people. He believed that the sole answer to race prejudice lay in sweeping away the capitalist system and in the establishment of a socialist order which would end national oppression once and for all.

Office of the National Secretary

## The Socialist Party National Headquarters

180 WASHINGTON STREET

Send Remittances to  
J. Mahlon Barnes

Chicago, Ill.,

BEN HANFORD  
For Vice-President

Aboard "Red Special" En Route to DuQuith,  
Sept. 21st., 1908.

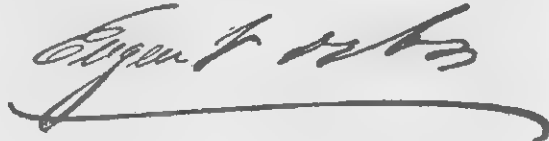
My Lincoln Steffens,

New York, N.Y.

My dear Mr. Steffens:-

You have written from and have been inspired by a social  
brain, a social heart and a social conscience and if you are not  
a socialist I do not know one.

Yours faithfully,



*Lincoln Steffens, the celebrated author, exposed in his writings the connections between the political machines and the powerful corporations of the day. Steffens remained a warm friend of Debs throughout his life.*

Developing years, however, were to show him that it was not necessary to await the complete change in the social system to advance the cause of Negro liberation and that civil rights could be protected and extended to all people by militant struggle carried on under present conditions.

To bring the message of socialism to every corner of the country, the Socialist Party hit upon the idea of a special campaign train. A sleeper, a baggage car, and an observation and dining coach, the train was known as the "Red Special." It carried bundles of literature as well as a little-known literature agent—Tom Mooney—soon destined to become a world-famous labor prisoner.

The "Red Special" took Debs thousands of miles during the campaign. Naturally it cost money to do this and even the \$20,000 that was raised by direct appeal proved insufficient to keep the train moving until election day. Debs was forced to make a special appeal to raise more money.

This brought forth the accusation from the Democrats, mindful of the large vote Debs had received in 1904, that the Socialists had accepted Republican money to finance the "Red Special." And Samuel Gompers, joining the attack, declared: "Come out into the open, Mr. Debs. Where does your party get the money?"

To this and similar queries, Debs replied:

"The campaign fund of the Socialist Party is made up almost wholly of the nickels and dimes of the working class, and all contributions are published in [its] official bulletin . . .

"Not a dollar has so far been received by the Socialist Party from any corporation, and not a dollar ever received by it has been used except for the education of the working class."

Even before the "Red Special" started, large crowds were turning out in Western states to hear Debs

"Ye Gods! But these are pregnant days!" wrote Debs at that time. "The hosts pour in from all directions—men, women, children and babies, and all of them, including the babies, are



up in arms against the capitalist system. The farmers out here, thousands of them, are revolutionary to the core and ripe and ready for action."

On August 31, 1908, Debs left Chicago on the "Red Special." As the train rolled on, groups of farmers gathered at crossings to watch it and wave red handkerchiefs. In towns too small for a regular meeting, Debs addressed the people from the observation car of the train. But in the larger cities, there would be meetings and rallies.

At Muscatine, Iowa, Debs addressed 2,000 people. At Kansas City, he spoke to a crowd ranging from 2,500 to 3,000 persons, all of whom had paid an admission fee. At this meeting, as at many others, a large number of women were present.

"This is about the time of year," said Debs, "when the orators of the capitalist parties—the Democrats and Republicans—are coming before you and telling you how intelligent you are—they tell you how intelligent you are to keep you ignorant. We tell you how ignorant you are to make you intelligent. You produce all the wealth and have none of it. The capitalist class produces no wealth and has all of it. You make the automobiles and—walk."

"And get run over," shouted a voice from the audience.

On September 29 the "Red Special" arrived at Toledo, Ohio. Thousands of people were at the depot to welcome Debs. Among them was the celebrated writer, Brand Whitlock, progressive mayor of the city, who greeted the Socialist candidate cordially, and, according to local newspaper accounts, contributed money to the party's campaign funds. In the evening Debs spoke to an overflow crowd of 2,000 people at Memorial Hall.

In other places, however, the authorities were not so friendly. For example, at the Stanford University chapel in San Francisco Debs was denied the use of the hall. Commenting on this, the *Miners' Magazine* in its September issue observed:

"The class which dominates this institution feel no generous

thrills vibrating their hearts for the class whose cause Debs advocates and defends. It is doubtful if Christ returned to earth and preached the same doctrines that He proclaimed nineteen hundred years ago that He would have been admitted to the chapel of Stanford University."

The "Red Special" arrived in New York state on October 2. At Rochester, 5,000 people paid admission to hear Debs at Convention Hall. Hundreds were unable to get inside.

"The capitalists refer to you as mill hands, farm hands, factory hands, machine hands—hands, hands!" said Debs in Rochester that night. "You are the horny-handed sons of toil. If you ought to be proud of your hands, the capitalist ought to be ashamed of his. A capitalist would feel insulted if you called him a hand. He's a head. The trouble is he owns his head and your hands."

When the "Red Special" entered Grand Central Station in New York City, according to an Associated Press dispatch of October 4, 1908, thousands of people "fought to see Debs."

And when the Socialist candidate walked out on the platform of the Hippodrome on the same day, it "was a signal for a remarkable demonstration. He was cheered for fifteen minutes; women, of whom there were many in the audience, wept hysterically; men embraced each other and red flags were waved."

Ten thousand people filled every seat in the auditorium to hear Debs, the man whom Gompers had styled "the Apostle of Failure!" Many were unable to get inside but waited through the meeting to catch a glimpse of the speaker or touch his coat as he departed.

"What was deemed still more remarkable about the meeting," commented a newspaper, "was that all these people had paid 15 cents to 50 cents for admission. No other political party than the Socialist could do the same thing."

Addressing his New York audience Debs was at his best: ". . . Capitalism has fulfilled its mission, for the capitalist

class can no longer control the productive forces, nor manage industry, nor give employment to the workers.

"And so the historic mission of this movement is to abolish capitalism, based upon private ownership, and reorganize society upon a basis of collective ownership of the means of production and distribution.

"This change is coming as certain as I stand in your presence. It will come as soon as you are ready for it, and you will be ready for it as soon as you understand what socialism means. . ."

On October 23, Debs spoke in Evansville, Indiana. That night, Mr. Taft, the Republican candidate, made a speech in the same city and, according to the newspapers, more people paid an admission fee to hear Debs than heard Taft at a free meeting.

When the "Red Special" chugged into Woodstock, Illinois, early in November, a few days before election, a band was there to greet him. Debs delivered an address to the people of the community from the steps of the Woodstock jail where he had been a prisoner thirteen years before.

Before leaving Woodstock, Debs escorted a group of his friends through the prison and pointed out the cell in which he had spent six months for his participation in the Pullman strike.

Debs's last speech of the campaign was made in Chicago, the day before the election. A crowd of 16,000 packed the Regiment Armory to hear him.

Then back to Terre Haute. It was the last stop for the "Red Special." Altogether, the Socialist candidate had spoken to an estimated 800,000 people during the campaign and had covered thousands of miles from one end of the nation to the other.

At home, Debs, his wife and his brother heard the election returns as they came in by telephone and telegraph. Despite the enthusiasm he had evoked during the campaign, the vote he received showed but a slight increase over that of four

years earlier. It came to 421,000. William Howard Taft was the new President.

The reasons why the vote for Debs was not larger were not far to seek. Both Democratic and Republican parties had been speaking in progressive tones with Taft assuming the role of "trust buster" and Bryan conducting his campaign as the "Great Commoner" reminiscent of 1896.

Besides, employers took advantage of the bad times to intimidate workers and it was a common practice for employees to receive in their pay envelope prior to election day a notice to the effect that, if Taft were not elected, the worker need not report for work again.

Moreover, during the campaign Debs mainly offered a criticism of capitalism in general. He did not emphasize enough the immediate problem facing the people.

Following the campaign of 1908, Debs emerged as one of the nation's most popular leaders.

But despite this fact, Debs was reluctant to rank himself among the labor leaders of the nation. His bitter experiences with the bureaucratic leadership of the A. F. of L. as well as his clashes with top officials within his own party had made him view many leaders with suspicion.

"I am not a labor leader," Debs once told an audience of workers. "I do not want you to follow me or any one else. If you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into this promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, some one else would lead you out."

On another occasion, Debs urged workers to depend less on leaders and more on themselves. "You have depended too much on [leaders] and not enough on yourself. I don't want you to follow me. I want you to cultivate self-reliance. . ."

"Give me the rank and file every day in the week," said

Debs. "When I rise it will be *with* the ranks, and not *from* the ranks . . ."

Flowing from these ideas was a deep and stirring love for the ordinary rank-and-file worker. Debs loved hard-working, industrious men and women—those who did the "Jimmy Higgins" work.

"It is the workers, the men and women who do the hard work in building up their branches and their locals, to whom all the credit, homage, honor and glory is due. They are the salt of the earth, the gold in the rainbow. These simple people, these Jimmie Higginses who work early and late for the cause, who arrange the meetings, who wash the dishes after the festive dinners—O my soul!

"How much we owe to the workers in our movement. They expect no pay; they receive no honors. If you were to approach them with your thanks for the good they have done, they would blush to the roots of their hair . . ."

And the hard-working people, in turn, loved him because he actually represented the type of leader they felt they needed, one they could trust. The working people needed leaders. But they needed leaders in the mold of a Debs rather than the compromising leadership represented by a number of top officials in the Socialist Party.

As early as 1902 Debs took certain Socialist leaders to task for the luke-warm manner in which they responded to actions taken by the western trade unions in support of the Socialist Party platform.

"Stripped of unnecessary verbiage and free from subterfuge," wrote Debs in the *International Socialist Review* of November, 1902, "the Socialist Party has been placed in the attitude of turning its back upon the young, virile, class-conscious union movement of the West, and fawning at the feet of the 'pure and simple' movement of the East, and this . . . has been done by the men who are supposed to stand sponsor to the party. . . ."

"They may congratulate themselves that upon this point at

least they are in perfect accord with the capitalist press, and also with the 'labor lieutenants,' the henchmen and heelers, whose duty it is to warn the union against socialism and guard its members against working-class action."

On other occasions the militant spirit of Debs came into conflict with the cautious, compromising attitude of the Socialist Party leadership. In July, 1910, in a letter to an active Socialist worker, Debs came out for unrestricted immigration, opposing a majority report submitted to the party congress, a report which reflected the same position as that held by the A. F. of L. of the day.

"I have just read the majority report of the Committee on Immigration," Debs wrote. "It is utterly unsocialistic, reactionary and in truth outrageous, and I hope you will oppose it with all your power."

"The plea that certain races are to be excluded because of tactical expediency would be entirely consistent in a bourgeois convention of self-seekers, but should have no place in a proletarian gathering under the auspices of an international movement that is calling on the oppressed and exploited workers of all the world to unite for their emancipation . . ."

Although Debs welcomed into the ranks of the Socialist Party men and women from the professions and small businessmen who renounced the two old parties, he was keenly concerned lest the party become prey to "bourgeois self-seekers." He viewed with alarm the rise to leadership within the Socialist Party of persons interested only in some immediate reforms. Often the reason for their rise was simply the result of their being better trained in writing and public speaking.

In an article entitled "Danger Ahead," which appeared in the *International Socialist Review* of January, 1911, he said:

"The danger I see ahead is that the Socialist Party at this stage, and under existing conditions, is apt to attract elements which it cannot assimilate, and that it may either be weighed down or torn asunder with internal strife, or that it may be-

come permeated and corrupted with the spirit of bourgeois reform to an extent that will practically destroy its virility and efficiency as a revolutionary organization. To my mind the working class character and revolutionary integrity of the Socialist party are of the first importance . . ."

By 1912 the Socialist Party was reaching the pinnacle of its power and influence. In that year it had about 120,000 members, workers for the most part, with a large number of farmers from the western states who suffered from the practices of banks, railroads, and other monopolies.

Most of the members of the Socialist Party who were workers belonged to trade unions. So strong were the Socialists in the American Federation of Labor that they were able on more than one occasion to challenge Gompers' rule.

And a number of unions—such as the machinists, garment workers, and restaurant employees—incorporated into their official constitutions the idea of the class struggle and the need of reorganizing society along more equitable lines.

Yet, despite its working-class character, the Socialist Party lacked a fundamental understanding of Marxist theory. Rather than such an understanding, the Socialist Party followed a course based on the practical necessities of the day. And thus it opened the way for middle-class reform to take the place of Marxist theory, as Debs himself had predicted.

By 1912 the Socialist Party had a following in every state in the union. Socialist mayors and municipal officers were no longer rarities, particularly in industrial areas.

Socialist newspapers were plentiful. There were 13 daily, 298 weekly, and 12 monthly publications, most of them privately owned. The largest Socialist publication was the *Appeal to Reason*, published weekly in Girard, Kansas, with a regular circulation of 500,000 readers increasing to more than one million when special editions were issued.

As in 1908, so in 1912, Eugene Debs was again nominated by the Socialist Party for President of the United States, the

fourth time in a row. Of all his Presidential campaigns, that of 1912 was the most strenuous. Emil Seidel, former Socialist mayor of Milwaukee, was the vice-presidential candidate.

"Some thought I was not physically able to make a campaign," Debs told a friend, "and to prove it they planned a speaking tour for me the like of which no Presidential candidate has ever made in the history of the United States. I spoke for sixty-eight consecutive days, sometimes five and six times a day, without rest. There were times when I thought I would drop in my tracks, but I kept on determined to fulfill the expectations of the comrades throughout the country."

In 1912, as four years previous, the American people were deeply disturbed by the fact that control of the country's economy was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Giant corporations dominated the basic industries of the nation. Powerful banking interests controlled these corporations.

Three banking groups controlled 112 directorships in key corporations in America whose total financial holdings amounted to the hitherto unheard of sum of over \$22,000,000,000!

No wonder all of the candidates in 1912—Taft the Republican, Wilson the Democrat, Roosevelt the "Bull Moose" Progressive, and Debs the Socialist—were faced with the problem of how to deal with the trusts.

As in previous years, so now, Debs's solution of the problem was in the public ownership of monopolies. His opponents argued either for the strengthening of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 or for its more vigorous enforcement or for both.

In pitting himself against the big monopolies, Debs was carrying forward the people's struggle. Both he and his party advocated the public ownership of the basic industries of the country, a step which they believed was essential to the establishment of real democracy in America.

In 1912 Debs and the Socialist Party fought not only for the public ownership of the trusts, but also for a fully worked out system of social insurance.

# The Cartoonist and the Social Revolution

By Eugene V. Debs

THE word cartoon is rather vaguely and unsatisfactorily defined as a "sketch or design executed on strong paper and of the size to be reproduced in fresco or tapestry, a pictorial sketch dealing with a political or social subject." This conveys but a meager idea of the cartoonist as an educator and agitator and the cartoon as a work of art. Few people have any adequate conception of the cartoon as a factor in public opinion and social progress. Most cartoons had a powerful influence in moulding public sentiment and shaping the national destiny during the civil war. Since that day there has been a steady development of the art, but few of its exponents have mastered it sufficiently to stamp upon it in distinct and ineffaceable letters the impress of their name.



The reason for this period of seeming mediocrity is easily found. There has been no great national event since the civil war to stir to its depths the patriotism of the people and inspire their leaders and painters to scale the heights of immortal achievement.

Cartooning, whether considered as an educational force or as an art has advanced but slightly during the money-making period which followed the war between the states and the downfall of chattel slavery. The inspiration has been lacking. There is no moral idealism in the covering of the market and the pursuit of private profit.

Great masterful cartoonists must starve under social capitalism—or perforce prostitute their genius, as so many have done in the base and vulgar ends of the masters of the press.

It is true that in the fierce rivalry between capitalist parties in the heat of a national campaign for the spoils of office cartooning attains a high order has been developed, but this has served to demonstrate the possibilities of the art rather than to satisfy the critical mind with these performances.

Cartooning capitalism is far more inspiring than capitalist cartooning. Compare some of the weak, inspired, vulgar pictorial attacks upon Socialism in capitalist papers with the virile, gripping, masterful specimens of the art produced by such revolutionary artists as Ryan Walker, Art Young, Dan, or Kev, Ward Savage and Walter Crane in their terrible onslaught upon the capitalist system and its regime of riches and squander, money and misery, crime and corruption.

These are the young artists of the social revolution. Their eyes, perception and touch has the divine quality of inspiration, and they are rising grandly to supremacy and exaltation.

I have before me as I write a cartoon—it is something so much more than that—by the openly-gifted Ryan Walker. It is on war and tells the gruesome, grisly story from the lure of buoyant enthusiasm to the fatal hour of butchery and the final scene of a ghastly skull with its eyeless sockets and branching bones in a nameless grave. This piece of work is supreme art. It is immortal. It could not have been produced for pay. It leaps white-hot from a soul that abhors war because of its passionate love for humanity.

This cartoon, this masterly portrayal of the revolting horror and unspeakable agony of "civilized warfare," tells its frightful story at a glance. It requires no study and no interpretation. It is a terrible picture flashed upon the mind and can never be forgotten. A school child gazes before it, shudders and understands. Its stern and compelling protest and its profound and swarming warning appeal alike to young and old, poor and rich, ignorant and learned. All are alike halted, shocked, and sent forth loathing war and abominating its crimes and horrors. A score of pages of the most graphic writing could not be so effective.

This is the cartoon at the high tide of inspiration. It is one of the most subtle of educational forces. Its evolution has been slow under capitalism but is being rapidly accelerated with the growth of Socialism. The true art of the untrammeled cartoonist is now being developed and he will be one of the most inspiring factors in the propaganda of the revolution.

No more is the cartoonist compelled to prostitute his genius and traffic in his art. The press of capitalism no longer tempts him; its chains of dependence no longer hold him captive. The social revolution fires his blood and he eagerly seizes his opportunities to develop his art and ennoble himself in the service of humanity.

The revolution is still in its youth and yet the social cartoonist, incarnate of its spirit and flashing forth its message, has arrived. Already he has won distinction, but he is still in the boyhood of his achievement. He is the social conscience, the social sense of duty, the social love and the social inspiration, and his the thrillingly joyous and self-imposed task to redeem the art of pictorial appeal from gross and sordid commercialism and consecrate it to the cause of freedom and the service of humanity.

Of all modern, highly industrialized countries, the United States was practically the only one at the time without any system of social insurance for its workers. No state in the union had laws providing for insurance against old age and unemployment. Relatively few states had workingmen's compensation laws. Working people were at the mercy of a doctrine placing responsibility for injuries upon the workers themselves rather than the government or the employers.

In addition to a system of social legislation, Debs and the Socialist Party of 1912 advocated the abolition of child labor, legislation to establish the eight-hour day, woman suffrage, and the adoption of such democratic reforms as the direct election of senators.

The campaign of 1912 was a hard-fought one. The Republican Party was split wide open. Because of the extreme conservatism of the Republican machine, a progressive wing was formed which, refusing to support William Howard Taft for re-election, bolted and formed the so-called "Bull-Moose" Progressive Party, another third party in American history.

With Theodore Roosevelt as its Presidential nominee, this new party established a platform—a "Charter with the People"—which came out for a system of social insurance, advanced labor legislation, and many democratic reforms. Thus many essential sections of the Socialist Party platform were taken over.

But despite this, as the campaign of 1912 developed, it became obvious that Debs would poll a much larger vote than he had four years before.

Maintaining that there was really no great difference between a Taft, a Roosevelt, or a Wilson, Debs opened his campaign on June 16, 1912, with a speech at Chicago. In this speech he made it clear that the Socialist Party was "the only party of the people, the only party opposed to the rule of the plutocracy . . ." He looked upon the campaign as "our supreme op-

The long, lank figure of Gene Debs was a favorite subject for cartoonists of the day. Above is a sketch, Debs's favorite, by Ryan Walker, a cartoonist of the early Socialist and labor press.

portunity to reach the American people" and declared that "This is our year in the United States."

The enthusiasm for Debs was expressed in many ways including such songs as:

*Injunction Taffy makes us daffy,  
He's surely in the soup,  
We'll pull an incision in tariff revision  
And Willy's wings will droop;  
The fake "Bull Moose" can go on a booze,  
His "confession of faith" is bent,  
He'll buck and roar in a few weeks more  
When DEBS is president.*

But, when the singing and shouting were over, Woodrow Wilson, Governor of New Jersey, a college professor turned politician, was elected President. Debs, the Socialist candidate, more than doubled his 1908 vote, receiving approximately 900,000 votes.

The total Debs vote was surprising. It was won in the face of Roosevelt's Progressive Party which had "borrowed" from the Socialist platform the most popular planks of the day.

Despite this, however, Debs had received some six per cent of the total vote cast.

Commenting on the outcome of the election, Debs triumphantly declared in the *Appeal to Reason*, November 16, 1912: "The Socialist party from now on is the party of the people. This virile young giant will make history in the next few years . . ."

## Fighting for Peace

*When I say I am opposed to war,  
I mean ruling class war . . .*

It was on June 28, 1914, that a shot broke the quiet of the little Bosnian town of Sarajevo. It found its mark. Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria and Hungary, who was in Sarajevo at the time, fell dead.

This shot was destined to re-echo around the world and set off a war which had long been in the making and which the organized labor movement of the world had sought to prevent.

World War I had begun.

Rivalry over markets and sources of raw materials resulted eventually in German troops marching through neutral Belgium to get to France. Soon all the great powers of the world with the exception of the United States were at war.

Among the working people of the time there was considerable anti-war sentiment. In the *Appeal to Reason* Eugene Debs wrote an article in August, 1915, which was considered to be against all wars.

But Debs was *not* a pacifist. Although opposed to all "ruling class war," he was ready to fight "heart and soul" in "the world-wide war of the social revolution."

In an article appearing in the *Appeal to Reason*, September 11, 1915, he wrote:

" . . . I am not opposed to all war, nor am I opposed to fighting under all circumstances, and any declaration to the contrary



would disqualify me as a revolutionist. When I say I am opposed to war, I mean ruling-class war, for the ruling class is the only class that makes war . . .

"But while I have not a drop of blood to shed for the oppressors of the workingclass and the robbers of the poor, the thieves and looters, the brigands and murderers whose debauched misrule is the crime of the ages, I have a heart-full to shed for their victims when it shall be needed in the war for their liberation.

"I am not a capitalist soldier; I am a proletarian revolutionist. I do not belong to the regular army of the plutocracy, but to the irregular army of the people. I refuse to obey any command to fight from the ruling class, but I will not wait to be commanded to fight for the workingclass.

"I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and that is the world-wide war of the social revolution."

Although the American people were not ready to go as far as Debs in his opposition to war, most of them were, like him, opposed to America's entering it.

But—in the years between 1914 and 1917 the United States became the arsenal as well as the warehouse of the Allied nations fighting Germany. America's recovery from the economic recession of 1913 and 1914 was based on supplying England and France with the provisions they needed to keep fighting.

The year 1915 saw business expanding and the following year, 1916, was a boom year, particularly for American big business. Billions of dollars' worth of foodstuffs, munitions, steel, and vital material of every kind were shipped to the countries abroad. Although the bulk of these provisions went to the Allies, some was shipped to Germany via "neutral" countries.

The bulk of American goods going to the Allied nations, the question arose as to how they were to pay for what they received. England and France, to meet their obligations, shipped

gold, merchandise, and other securities to the United States.

But this was not enough. More money was needed. There was but one way out. Loans. Loans to help England and France pay their debts. And Wall Street had the money.

The only obstacle was the official policy of the United States towards the lending of money to warring nations in Europe. In 1914 the American government, through Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, informed J. P. Morgan:

"There is no reason why loans should not be made to the governments of neutral nations but, in the judgment of this government, loans by American bankers to any foreign nation which is at war are inconsistent with the true spirit of neutrality." Not long after, Bryan left the Cabinet.

In 1915 the farms and factories of the nation were humming with activity. Production was high.

The new Secretary of State, Robert Lansing, warned President Woodrow Wilson that unless loans were granted, the country's new-found prosperity would be short-lived. Under such pressure, the ban on Wall Street loans was lifted. And Morgan and the bankers lost no time in taking advantage of the opportunity. In 1915 and 1916 they sold about \$1,500,000,000 worth of bonds in the United States, these bonds being subscribed to by some of the largest corporations in the country. Now, the United States could no longer really be neutral.

Germany, anxious to keep American goods from reaching England and France, launched a campaign of submarine warfare. The inevitable happened. American lives were lost.

Among certain interests, "preparedness" became the watchword. The National Security League, financed by banking and munitions groups, worked overtime. Preparedness supporters lobbied in Congress for universal military training and staged parades in many cities. During one of these parades, held in San Francisco, a bomb exploded, killing a number of people. Thomas Mooney and Warren K. Billings, two union organizers, were indicted for the crime.

Due to protests on the part of organized labor and international demonstrations on their behalf in the Soviet Union and other countries, the sentence imposed on Mooney and Billings was changed from death to life imprisonment.

And in 1939—twenty-three years after their conviction—the two were pardoned on grounds that the testimony had been perjured.

The year 1916 which saw the arrest of Mooney and Billings on trumped-up charges was the year in which Woodrow Wilson was re-elected president of the United States on a "he-kept-us-out-of-war" platform. It also marked the first Presidential campaign since 1900 in which Eugene V. Debs was not a candidate. He had declined the Socialist nomination.

Debs was no longer a young man. Over sixty years of age, he was less and less physically able to maintain the pace demanded of a Presidential candidate, particularly a candidate for a minority party.

So Allan Benson, a well-known publicist, was selected as the party's choice, running on an anti-war platform. He received 585,000 votes. Later Benson was to join the small pro-war faction of the Socialist Party.

The next year, 1917, started as a dark year for the Allied nations. The situation was growing worse on the military front. It was becoming clear that Morgan and his big business associates could no longer underwrite the growing need of the Allied nations for money.

Without loans, it was questionable whether the Allies could carry on. Then, too, if shipments to England and France were to stop, Wall Street's loans were in danger. At the same time, it was very doubtful whether American prosperity could continue if such markets were to disappear.

The announcement of unrestricted German submarine warfare, effective February 1, threatened to impair seriously Ameri-

can ability to ship foodstuffs and munitions to England and France.

Early in March, 1917, as a result of economic chaos, widespread strikes and war weariness, revolutionary forces in Russia succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt Tsarist regime.

During the next eight months one "provisional" government followed another, all more concerned with protecting the interests of wealthy industrialists and landowners than in advancing the welfare of working people. Finally, the workers and peasants, led by the Bolshevik party under Vladimir Lenin, came into power.

Meanwhile, the American government was confronted with the question of how an economic smash-up could be averted in the United States. The answer was given by Walter H. Page, American Ambassador to Great Britain. In a confidential cable dated March 5, 1917, the Ambassador stated: "Perhaps our going to war is the only way in which our present prominent trade position can be maintained and a panic averted."

On April 6, the United States of America declared war on Germany. The Socialist Party, in national convention at St. Louis, April 7-14, went on record as "unalterably opposed to American entrance into war."

The St. Louis resolution declared in part:

"The Socialist Party of the United States, in the present grave crisis, solemnly reaffirms its allegiance to the principle of internationalism and working class solidarity the world over, and proclaims its unalterable opposition to the war just declared by the government of the United States . . .

"The Socialist Party of the United States is unalterably opposed to the system of exploitation and class rule which is upheld and strengthened by military power and sham national patriotism. We, therefore, call upon the workers of all countries to refuse support to their governments in their wars . . . The only struggle which would justify the workers in taking up arms is the great struggle of the working class of the world to

free itself from economic exploitation and political oppression . . .

"The American people did not and do not want this war. They have not been consulted about the war and have had no part in declaring war . . . We brand the declaration of war by our government as a crime against the people of the United States and against the nations of the world . . ."

The statement was overwhelmingly adopted by the convention. Only five delegates supported a minority report which sought to justify American participation in the war. Later the membership of the Socialist Party ratified the convention statement by a referendum vote.

Eugene Debs took the St. Louis proclamation very seriously. It reflected the ideas and convictions held by him for many years. And the statement was also taken seriously by other fighting Socialists who were to suffer many hardships for their views.

On June 15, 1917, Congress passed the Espionage Act which made it a crime to speak or otherwise act against the war.

From mid-June of that year to the beginning of July, 1918, about a thousand men and women were prosecuted for anti-war activities. Some were arrested. Among these were three Ohio Socialist leaders, Alfred Wagenknecht, Charles Baker and Charles E. Ruthenberg, the latter to become founder and national secretary of the Communist Party. The three were sent to the Canton, Ohio, workhouse.

The cause of their imprisonment was used by Debs as the text of a vigorous anti-war speech he delivered on June 16, 1918, to delegates of the state Convention of the Socialist Party of Ohio at Canton.

When Debs rose to speak he knew there were agents in the audience who were there to take down his address and report its contents to the Federal authorities. But he was not the kind of man who would employ caution on such occasions.

Mrs. Marguerite Prevy, chairman of the meeting, introduced

him as "a man that is the best loved and most hated of all men in the United States today." Then Debs took his place at the rostrum and began to speak.

"I have just returned from a visit over yonder," he said, pointing to the Canton Workhouse, "where three of our most loyal comrades are paying the penalty for their devotion to the cause of the working class. They have come to realize, as many of us have, that it is extremely dangerous to exercise the constitutional right of free speech in a country fighting to make democracy safe for the world . . .

"I may not be able to say all that I think, but I am not going to say anything that I do not think.

"But I would rather a thousand times be a free soul in jail than to be a sycophant and coward on the streets . . .

"If it had not been for the men and women who, in the past, have had the moral courage to go to jail, we would still be in the jungles."

Turning to the question of the war, Debs asked:

"Are we opposed to Prussian militarism?"

The crowd laughed and shouted:

"Yes. Yes."

Resuming where the crowd left off, the speaker, amidst thunderous applause and cheers, continued:

"Why, we have been fighting it since the day the Socialist movement was born and we are going to continue to fight it, day and night, until it is wiped from the face of the earth . . .

"I have no earthly use for the Junkers of Germany, and not one particle more use for the Junkers of the United States . . .

"These very gentry who are today wrapped up in the American flag, who make the claim that they are the only patriots, who have their magnifying glasses in hand, scanning the country for some evidence of disloyalty, so eager, so ready to apply the brand to the men who dare to even whisper opposition to junker rule in the United States . . .

"I know Tom Mooney intimately, as if he were my own

brother . . . For years he has been fighting the battles of the working class out on the Pacific coast. He refused to be bribed or to be browbeaten . . ."

Then discussing the Russian Revolution of November 7, 1917, and the establishment of the first socialist republic in world history, Debs declared:

"Here, in this assemblage I hear our heart beat responsive to the Bolsheviks of Russia. Yes, those heroic men and women, those unconquerable comrades, who have, by their sacrifice, added fresh luster to the international movement. . . . The very first act of that immortal revolution was to proclaim a state of peace with all the world, coupled with an appeal, not to the kings, not to the emperors, not to the rulers, not to the diplomats, but an appeal to the people of all nations . . ."

And then the stirring call to action:

"When we vote together and act together on the industrial field, we will develop the supreme power of the one class that can bring permanent peace to the world . . ."

"The call is ringing in our ears . . . you cannot falter without being convicted of treason to yourselves . . . Do not worry over the charge of treason to your masters, but be concerned about the treason that involves yourselves.

"Be true to yourself and you cannot be a traitor to any good cause on earth . . ."

"In due course of time the hour will strike, and this great cause—the greatest in history—will proclaim the emancipation of the working class and the brotherhood of all mankind."

Four days later Debs was indicted for violating the Espionage Act and on September 9, 1918, he went on trial in the Federal Court in Cleveland, Ohio.

## Tried and Found Guilty

*There is an infinitely greater issue . . . American institutions are on trial . . .*

"What can they do to me?" asked Eugene V. Debs, after his indictment by the United States Federal Court in Cleveland, Ohio, for violation of the Espionage Act. "I've lived and seen everything. Now I'm sixty-three years old and just a lot of bones with skin stretched over them . . ."

The trial of Debs, presided over by Judge D. C. Westenhaver, attracted the attention of the working people of the nation—and the world. Debs took the position from the beginning that the First Amendment to the Constitution protected, or was intended to protect, his rights as an American citizen.

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press, or the right of people peaceably to assemble and to petition the government for a redress of their grievances."

When Debs entered the court room on September 9, 1918, he was surrounded by friends and admirers who had been standing outside the court room doors waiting for his arrival. It took only four hours to examine, cross-examine, and select twelve jurymen, all of whom, with one exception, were retired farmers or merchants.

During the course of the trial, a newspaper reporter for the Cleveland newspaper, *Plain Dealer*, took the witness stand

for the government. He reported the proceedings of the Socialist convention held in Canton on June 16 and told how he had interviewed Debs at his hotel just before he had delivered his address. The reporter had asked Debs if the statement was true that he had repudiated the anti-war resolution of the St. Louis convention of the year previous.

To this Debs answered:

"I approved of the adoption of the platform in form and substance at the time it was created, but in the light of the Russian situation I think we should have put forth a restatement of the aims of the Socialist Party . . ."

The reporter further stated that Debs had told him it was his opinion that the Bolsheviks of Russia were the inspiration of the world.

Another government witness was Virgil Steiner, a young man, twenty years old. Employed by the government to take stenographic notes of Debs's Canton speech, Steiner testified that he had extreme difficulty in taking down all that had been said but that he had done the best job he could. It was largely this report that provided the evidence used against Debs in the trial.

After the young man had ended his testimony, Debs approached him and, putting his hand on Steiner's shoulders, assured him that he had done the best he could under the circumstances. There were places in the transcript of Steiner's report which did not tally with Debs's own recollection of the speech. Attorneys for Debs advised him to use this fact to demand an acquittal. But Debs refused.

On September 11, the government informed the court that the prosecution rested. Debs and his counsel retired to an ante-room and when they returned Attorney Seymour Stedman, speaking for the four defense lawyers, announced to the court: "Mr. Debs will plead his case before the jury."

After the government had made its final arguments, Debs stood up, threw back his shoulders, adjusted his glasses and

glancing at the notes he had made the night before, began:

"For the first time in my life I appear before a jury in a court of law to answer to an indictment for crime.

"I am not a lawyer. I know little about court procedure, about the rules of evidence or legal practice. I know only that you gentlemen are to hear the evidence brought against me, that the court is to instruct you in the law, and that you are to determine by your verdict whether I shall be branded with criminal guilt and be consigned, perhaps to the end of my life, in a felon's cell.

"Gentlemen, I do not fear to face you in this hour of accusation, nor do I shrink from the consequences of my utterances or my acts.

"Standing before you, charged as I am with crime, I can yet look the Court in the face, I can look you in the face, I can look the world in the face, for in my conscience, in my soul, there is festering no accusation of guilt."

Declaring that the jury might infer from what the prosecution had said that he favored force and violence, Debs made it clear that he had never advocated violence in any form; that he always believed in education, in enlightenment, and that he had always made his appeal to the reason and conscience of the people.

"I admit being opposed to the present form of government. I admit being opposed to the present social system. I am doing what little I can, and have been for many years, to bring about a change that shall do away with the rule of the great body of people by a relatively small class and establish in this country an industrial and social democracy."

After disposing of the question of violence, Debs turned to the accusation of his being sympathetic to the Russian Bolsheviks. Using the court as a tribune to appeal to the American people on behalf of the Russian revolutionaries, Debs admitted he was guilty of the charge.

"I have read a great deal about the Bolsheviks of Russia that

is not true. I happen to know of my own knowledge that they have been grossly misrepresented by the press of this country.

"Who are these much-maligned revolutionists of Russia? For years they had been the victims of a brutal Tsar. They and their antecedents were sent to Siberia, lashed with a knout, if they even dreamed of freedom.

"At last the hour struck for a great change. The revolution came. The Tsar was overthrown and his infamous regime ended. What followed? The common people of Russia came into power—the peasants, the toilers, the soldiers—and they proceeded as best they could to establish a government of the people . . . It may be that the much-despised Bolsheviks may fail at last, but let me say to you that they have written a chapter of glorious history. It will stand to their eternal credit.

"The leaders are now denounced as criminals and outlaws. Let me remind you that there was a time when George Washington, who is now revered as the father of his country, was denounced as a disloyalist; when Sam Adams, who is known to us as the father of the American Revolution, was condemned as an incendiary, and Patrick Henry, who delivered that inspired and inspiring oration, that aroused the Colonists, was condemned as a traitor."

To the accusation of his having opposed the war, he also pleaded guilty:

"I have read some history. I know that it is ruling classes that make war . . . and not the people. In all of the history of this world the people have never yet declared a war. Not one."

Discussing evolving social conditions, the Socialist leader said: "You may hasten the change; you may retard it; you can no more prevent it than you can prevent the coming of the sunrise on the morrow."

As Debs continued to speak, the day drew to a close and the courtroom grew darker.

"And now, Gentlemen of the Jury," he said, "I am not going

to detain you too long . . . Gentlemen, I am the smallest part of this trial. I have lived long enough to appreciate my own personal insignificance in relation to a great issue that involves the welfare of the whole people.

"What you may choose to do to me will be of small consequence after all. I am not on trial here. There is an infinitely greater issue that is being tried in this court, though you may not be conscious of it. American institutions are on trial here before a court of American citizens . . .

"My fate is in your hands. I am prepared for the verdict."

Debs had spoken for almost two hours. His speech sealed his fate. He had not retracted a single word of his Canton address. He upheld the objectives of the Bolshevik leaders in the Russian Revolution and he had admitted to being opposed to the war which he considered an imperialist war.

Debs had refused to permit his four lawyers to conduct a defense. He had refused to avail himself of any possible loophole. Instead, he had chosen to use the trial and the international publicity attached to it as a public forum through which he could express his views on issues that were vital to him and to working people everywhere.

When the court was recessed, Debs was greeted outside by a throng of friends and admirers.

Next day Judge Westenhaver delivered his instructions to the jury. Shortly before eleven o'clock the jury retired and at six returned with its verdict.

Foreman Cyrus Stoner announced: "Guilty as charged in the indictment."

The Court set Saturday morning, September 14, as the time for the sentence. Before the sentence was passed, the judge asked Debs if he had anything to say.

"Your Honor," said Debs rising, "years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest of earth.



"I said then, I say now, that while there is a lower class I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free . . .

"I believe, Your Honor, in common with all Socialists, that this nation ought to own and control its industries. I believe, as all Socialists do, that all things that are jointly needed and used ought to be jointly owned—that industry, the basis of life, instead of being the private property of the few and operated for their enrichment, ought to be the common property of all, democratically administered in the interest of all . . .

"Let the people take heart and hope everywhere, for the cross is bending, the midnight is passing, and joy cometh with the morning . . . I am prepared to receive your sentence."

Debs was sentenced to serve ten years in prison.

It was not until March 10, 1919, four months after the signing of the Armistice which ended World War I, that the Supreme Court of the United States reviewed Eugene V. Debs's appeal. The sentence was unanimously upheld with the much heralded liberal jurist, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, delivering the opinion.

Debs was at his home in Terre Haute when he heard the news. In a special statement, he said:

"The decision is perfectly consistent with the character of the Supreme Court as a ruling class tribunal . . . Great issues are not decided by the courts, but by the people.

"I stand by every word of the Canton speech.

"The Supreme Court to the contrary, notwithstanding, the Espionage Law is perfectly infamous and a disgrace as well to the capitalist despotism at whose behest it was enacted. Sixty years ago the Supreme Court affirmed the validity of the Fugitive Slave Law to save chattel slavery. Five years later that infamous institution was swept from the land in a torrent of blood.

"I despise the Espionage Law with every drop of blood in

my veins, and I defy the Supreme Court and all the powers of capitalism to do their worst.

"All hail to the workers of America and the world! The day of emancipation is dawning."

## America's Most Famous Prisoner

*I enter the prison doors a flaming revolutionist  
—my head erect, my spirit untamed and my  
soul unconquerable.*

It was a clear spring day in western Indiana. Eugene V. Debs was at home busily engaged in packing his handbag. Only a few people in Terre Haute knew that he was scheduled to leave for prison that night—April 12, 1919.

Debs had asked that there be no send-off. "I just want to slip out quietly now," he said. "When I come back . . . that will be the time."

Before going to the railroad station where he was to take the train to Cleveland, Debs was surrounded at home by members of his immediate family, one or two friends, and a houseful of flowers, gifts of his neighbors. Seemingly unaffected, he sat in his rocking chair, smoking a cigar.

As the time drew near, Mrs. Debs said: "Well, Eugene, we had better start."

"Yes," he answered, "we don't want to miss our train."

At the station the faithful were there to see him off. As Debs approached, he was immediately surrounded by a crowd. Those who could not edge their way up to his side, reached over the heads of the crowd to clutch his coat sleeves.

One big miner, near enough to take him by the hand, said: "We're with you, Gene. By God, we're with you to the last man."

"I know," answered Debs, "until the last drop, we'll stand together, all of us. You know, only by standing together can we win. You boys take care of the outside and I'll take care of the inside."

As Debs mounted the steps of the train, a Pullman porter doffed his cap. Instantly Debs removed his own hat. As if it were a signal, the crowd did likewise.

Up front there was a soldier in uniform. On one sleeve he wore two gold stripes and on the other, one.

The soldier shuffled uneasily from foot to foot. Finally, unable to restrain himself any longer, he reached out, grasped Debs's hand and cried: "Mr. Debs, I went through hell over there for them, and now I'm ready to go through hell over here for you."

The crowd roared its approval. "And there are a million more like me," the soldier shouted to the crowd.

As the train prepared to pull out, Debs threw his wife a kiss and waved goodbye to the crowd.

Soon Terre Haute was left far behind as the train sped on its way. Accompanied by a few of his closest friends, Debs appeared to relax and spend most of his time reminiscing of his early days in the labor movement.

Finally the train pulled into Cleveland and he surrendered himself to the authorities.

In the meantime a meeting had been hurriedly called to protest the imprisonment of Debs. The officials, however, anxious to stop any such demonstration just as quickly hustled Debs out of the city.

The trip to Moundsville, West Virginia, was long and tedious. The elderly Debs was taken by a round-about route to avoid being recognized. The route included a day-long, exhausting trolley-car ride through Youngstown, Leetonia, East Liverpool, Steubenville, Wellsburg and Wheeling. Finally the party reached Moundsville.

Before entering the prison, Debs told his friends that he would like to dictate a statement. And so, in the very shadow of the penitentiary walls, Eugene Debs calmly issued his last message to the American people before becoming a convict. "I enter the prison doors a flaming revolutionist—my head erect, my spirit untamed and my soul unconquerable."

A few minutes later the prison door was shut behind him. Debs was now convict Number 2253.

Eugene Debs stayed but two months in Moundville Prison. At the end of that time he was transferred with the utmost secrecy to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Possibly the move was made because of the government's fear that miners in the coal fields of West Virginia might take the law into their own hands and free Debs. At a mass meeting, attended by several thousand miners and other people, there had been talk of doing just that.

The transfer was arranged with such secrecy that not even the Moundville prison warden knew of it until it was ordered. And a nationwide censorship was placed on all news wires.

Before leaving Moundville, Debs went the rounds of the prison, bidding goodbye to the men. There was unutterable sadness among them. They were not Socialists. They did not understand the social ideals of Debs. But they had come to know him as a man—one "who did not pity them, but who championed them."

As Debs left, one prisoner called out after him: "If ever you run again for President, Mr. Debs, and I'm out of here, put me down for one vote."

"And if ever you are in sorrow or trouble," answered Debs, "put me down as one friend."

On June 14, 1919, Debs arrived at Atlanta where he became convict Number 9653. He was assigned to a regular cell with five other men and given work in the prison hospital.

It never occurred to Debs to ask for special treatment as a

political prisoner. What was good enough, or as he put it, what was bad enough for the other prisoners, was good enough for him.

To the question of whether he repented of the actions that resulted in his being imprisoned, Debs indignantly replied:

"Repent! Repent! Repent for standing like a man! For having a conviction about a public question, and standing by it. . . . NO! Not in a thousand years shall I repent for a single principle that I possess. They are dearer to me than liberty, than life itself . . ."

Allowed to write but one letter a week—and that to his family—and permitted no political reading of any kind, Debs was to be shut off from the fast-moving, outside world for a long time.

"You remember what Lincoln said when at New Orleans he saw a young Negro woman being sold on the block," said Debs to someone who had visited him in prison. "Well, if I ever get out of here alive, I'll strike at the prison system harder than Lincoln ever hit at chattel slavery." And he did, writing a powerful and moving book, *Walls and Bars*, which vividly described the sordid and degrading aspects of prison life.

Debs was very popular among the prisoners. Whenever he appeared, scores of them would join him, read him their letters, tell him their troubles, and ask him for advice. He was their guest at a special Christmas Eve dinner arranged in his honor.

When a visiting reporter asked what moral power Debs had over his fellow-prisoners, the reply was: "He just loves them; he talks to them and they are different."

While Debs was in prison, countless poems were written about him. Some of them were collected in a volume the introduction to which was written by the celebrated author, Upton Sinclair.

In the meantime, reactionary elements in the country were using the "Red scare" to weaken and destroy labor unions whose membership by 1920 had grown to a little over 5,000,000.

At the beginning of that year, thousands of people were seized as "Reds" on the order of A. Mitchell Palmer, United States Attorney General.

Newspapers were shut down.

Teachers were forced to take so-called "loyalty" oaths.

Elected representatives of the people were denied their seats—all in the name of saving the country from communism.

The aim of this employer-inspired terror was to smash labor unions. A series of strikes, brought about by the rising cost of living and declining wages, had raised a clear threat to the profits and power of big business. Over 4,000,000 workers had gone out on strike in 1919 alone—notably in the steel, coal, and textile industries. To smash these strikes, the cry of a "red plot" was raised. Progressive-minded people were branded as "reds" and, if not sent to prison like Debs, were treated like lawless outcasts. Workers' organizations were under attack and attempts were even made to destroy conservative A. F. of L. unions.

It was not until years later that the nation took stock and discovered these "Bolsheviks" were merely Americans whose opinions were in open defiance to the powers that be.

While Debs was in prison, he found time to congratulate the women of the country on their having won the right to vote, a right for which they had fought in an organized manner since 1848. In a special message, he hailed their victory, pointing out the following fact:

"There has never been a day during these seventy-two years of painful and tragic struggle when either the Democratic or Republican party was not in power; never a day when they could not have granted the franchise and given women their just rights as citizens of the United States."

While Debs was in the Federal penitentiary at Atlanta, a serious internal crisis was developing within the Socialist Party.

A division was taking place, foreshadowed in 1918 by the organization of a "left-wing" which advocated the recognition

of World War I as an imperialist war, a war for profits and markets. In addition, the group endorsed the role of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian Revolution and supported Lenin's call for the organization of a new international to replace the older one, the so-called Second International.

Out of this "left-wing" was to grow the Communist Party composed overwhelmingly of the followers of Debs, though he himself never came to be associated with the organization.

In jail at the time and without the right to read political literature, Debs did not have a clear picture of what was taking place and lacked contact completely with the rank-and-file of the party. Despite this, however, his views at the time were more closely akin to that of the left elements in the Socialist Party.

He wholeheartedly endorsed the Socialist revolution in Russia. He placed so much importance on this event that in May, 1918, he suggested in a magazine article that the St. Louis platform of the Socialist Party be reformulated not only because it was "open to vicious interpretation," but also because the "Russian revolution has changed the face of Europe."

The article was extremely critical of the German Social-Democratic Party which Debs charged was allowing itself "to be used by the Hohenzollerns in invading Russia and crushing freedom there . . ."

On November 7, 1918, the first anniversary of the Russian revolution, Debs sent the following greetings to the Russian revolutionary leaders:

"On this anniversary day we pledge you, brave and unflinching comrades of the Soviet Republic, not only to protest against our government meddling with your affairs and interfering with your plans, but to summon to your aid all the progressive forces of our proletariat and render you freely all assistance in our power . . ."

On another occasion Debs remarked that "if history records the failure of their [Bolshevik] cause, it will be to the eternal

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# THE SOUL OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

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The world ~~stands~~ stands amazed, astounded, awe-inspired in the presence of Russia's stupendous historic achievement.

The Russian Revolution is without a precedent or parallel in history. Monumental in its glory, it stands alone. Behold its sublime majesty, catch its holy spirit, and join in its thrilling, inspiring appeal to the oppressed of every land to rise in their might, shake off their fetters, and proclaim their freedom to the world!

Russia! Russia!! Thy very name thrills in our veins, throbs in our hearts, and surges in our souls! Thou art indeed the land of miracles, and thy humble peasants and toilers stand forth the world's triumphant liberators!...

The heart of Russia in this hour of her glorious resurrection is the heart of humanity disenthralled; the soul of her triumphant Revolution is the soul of a new-born World.

Russia, the most cruelly oppressed, the most bitterly persecuted, the most brutally crushed nation on earth stands monumental today in her sympathy and love, her generosity and magnanimity toward the oppressed and downtrodden of every land beneath the skies.

Verily, the last are now first and the world's most pitilessly plundered and shamelessly exiled have become the world's revolutionary redeemers and supreme liberators.

Russia, triumphant in the rise of her peasants, toilers and soldiers — in the supremacy of her common people, the real people, the only people — glows with altruistic fervor, throbs with international solidarity, and appeals with infinite compassion to the spirit of world-wide brotherhood.

Not a trace of national selfishness has stained Russia's revolutionary regeneration. The Bolsheviks demanded nothing for themselves they did not demand in the same resolute spirit for the proletariat of all the world, and if history records the failure of their cause it will be to the eternal shame of those for whom these heroes offered up their lives and who suffered them to perish for the lack of sympathy and support.

An article on the Russian Revolution prepared for newspaper use.

shame of those for whom these heroes offered up their lives and who suffered them to perish for lack of sympathy and support...

Although Debs felt that "the dictatorship of the proletariat" was "an unfortunate term" leading to "misrepresentation," he nevertheless clearly recognized the need of the revolution protecting itself during the "transition period."

But whatever he thought of the phrase "dictatorship of the proletariat," he did not hesitate to hail from his prison cell, on November 7, 1920, "the Workers Republic [as] an inspiration to the workers of the world... the great hope of the human race..."

It was less than six months before this that Debs had been notified of his nomination as the Socialist candidate for President. As early as 1919, left groupings in the Socialist Party pushed through a resolution recommending the nomination of Debs. This action was taken despite the opposition of some Socialist leaders who expressed "misgivings" about the ability of a "jailbird" to receive popular support. However, these "misgivings" did not impress the rank and file of the Socialist Party and so in 1920 Debs was nominated by acclamation and a committee was dispatched to Atlanta to notify him of the news.

The notification ceremony took place in the office of Warden Zerbst.

Newspapermen and photographers filled the room, for this was the first time in American history that an imprisoned man, a "convict," had been nominated for the highest office in the land.

Clad in his homely prison garb, Debs, now clearly showing his years and in poor health, was officially informed by the committee of the action of the Socialist convention.

In accepting the nomination, Debs expressed his thanks but also his dissatisfaction with the Socialist Party platform and in no uncertain terms condemned the party's leadership.

"I have read the platform adopted by the convention," said

Debs, "and I wish I might say it had my unqualified approval . . . I believe it could have been much more effective if it had stressed the class struggle more prominently and if more emphasis had been laid on industrial organization . . .

"Socialist platforms are not made to catch votes . . . There is a tendency in the party to become a party of politicians instead of a party of workers. That policy must be checked, not encouraged. We are in politics not to get votes but to develop power to emancipate the workingclass."

Debs took Victor Berger, one of the Socialist Party leaders, severely to task for "red-baiting" when he said:

"I was sorry to read a speech of Berger's the other day attacking the Communists. I have known many comrades in all these parties. I have high regard for them. They are as honest as we are."

And if this were not enough to show his sharp disagreement with the Socialist Party leadership, Debs declared: "I regret that the convention did not see its way clear to affiliate with the Third International without qualifications . . ."

For days after the notification ceremonies, Debs said fellow prisoners congratulated him, "hands, black and white, were extended to me from cells and from all directions . . ."

Naturally Debs's campaign efforts were restricted. As one newspaper man in 1920 put it: Cox, the Democratic candidate, was making speeches from the tail end of a train; Harding, the Republican, from his front porch; and Debs, from his front cell. The actual campaigning was carried on by his running mate, Seymour Stedman, who was Debs's chief defense counsel.

On election night, the Socialist candidate—United States convict No. 9653—heard the returns in the warden's office.

"Early in the evening," Debs recalled later, "I conceded the election of Warren G. Harding and my own defeat, which apparently excited no surprise among those in the office or beyond the walls; the only surprise, if not chagrin, that was felt came from the prison cells."

And that night with 920,000 votes cast for him—the highest number he had ever received—Debs went to sleep and slept well.

Meanwhile, a campaign was under way to secure his release from prison. In 1919 the Chicago Federation of Labor, composed of a quarter of million of organized workers, had urged the immediate release of Debs in the following resolution:

"Whereas, Eugene V. Debs has devoted the larger part of his life to the working class in its struggle for better conditions; and

"Whereas, he was convicted and sentenced to ten years imprisonment as a result of war-time passion, the war now being ended, the Chicago Federation of Labor insisting upon restoring pre-war liberties, urge the release of Eugene V. Debs and urge that resolutions to this effect be adopted by all labor bodies and upon adoption that a copy be sent to the President of the United States, the Senators of the States where adopted and the Congressmen of the district wherein the resolution is adopted."

Early in April, 1920, the delegates of the System Federations of Northwest Railroads passed a resolution demanding "the immediate and unconditional release from prison of that fearless champion of labor, Eugene Victor Debs, whose only crime is that he would not permit the mad, professional patriots and buccaneers of Wall Street to influence him in any way or change his attitude toward the cause he has always held sacred."

A year later, on April 13, 1921, a petition of amnesty signed by 300,000 men and women was borne in a motor car to the doors of Congress. In the evening a mass meeting was held attended by delegates representing more than 2,200,000 organized workers.

Responding to the pressure from the membership, Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, joined in the movement to release Debs and, according to his



own testimony, "did everything within my power to accomplish that purpose."

On November 15, 1921, "a small army of pickets, including some Medal of Honor ex-servicemen" paraded in front of the main entrance of Continental Memorial Hall in Washington where the Disarmament Conference was in session. One of the banners read: "Soldiers who fought in the World War demand the release of the political prisoners."

According to a report by the New York *World* of the following day, the picketing was to continue until Debs, and other political prisoners convicted under the Espionage Act, were released.

In the meantime, prominent Europeans, like George Bernard Shaw and Romain Rolland, demanded the release of Debs. The Soviet government tried to obtain his liberation in exchange for an American imprisoned in Russia.

The demand for Debs's release had its repercussions in high government circles. Despite a recommendation for clemency, President Wilson, who prided himself upon being a liberal, refused to pardon Debs. He even went so far as to declare that as long as he was Chief Executive Debs would remain in jail.

To this Debs responded: "It is Wilson who needs a pardon from the American people, and if I had it within my power, I would grant him the pardon that would set him free."

In March 1921 Warren G. Harding succeeded Wilson in the White House. On Christmas Day, of that year, Debs was released from prison by President Harding.

As he left the prison, there was a spontaneous demonstration from the 2,300 inmates whose "hoarse voices" sounded like "a caged host."

"I felt myself overwhelmed with painful and saddened emotions. The impulse . . . seized me to turn back."

But Debs waved a last goodbye to his unfortunate friends whose faces were pressed against prison bars in cell after cell throughout the penitentiary. Up went a mighty shout and

then another and another until Debs was out of sight and could no longer hear their voices.

The following day, December 26, Debs visited the White House as the special guest of the President of the United States. What took place between the two has not been recorded. When Debs left Harding, he was met by reporters.

"As for the White House," he told them, "well, gentlemen, my personal preference is to live privately as a humble citizen in my cottage at Terre Haute."

On his way home Debs was everywhere greeted by crowds. When he finally reached Terre Haute, more than 30,000 people turned out to welcome him.

His home-coming was described in the *National Rip-Saw*, a Socialist monthly, as follows:

"Proudly they [miners and their wives and children] pinned on worn and shabby coats the wisps of ribbon and the 'welcome home' . . . Grizzled old railroad men, some dressed in their Sunday best, and some just as they had come from engine and caboose, prowled about trying to find something to do that would help them express the things they felt . . .

"All the bands in Terre Haute and many from adjoining mining camps were scattered about the long platform . . . Every engine, every factory whistle, every fire whistle and most of the church bells sent forth the joyous message that Gene Debs's train had entered the railroad yards . . ."

Mayor Hunter of Terre Haute was there at the station to greet Debs.

As America's most famous prisoner stepped off the train, a young miner walked up to a woman distributing "welcome home" pins and said:

"Here . . . pin one of them badges on me, right next to my service button. I never saw Gene Debs, but, by God, I saw war and any man and any woman who will go to prison for telling the truth about war is my kind all right."

Yes, Debs was home at last!

## Fighter to the End

*My heart has been, is and will be with the working-class . . .*

When Eugene Victor Debs left the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, he was a sick man.

Yet, true to his word, the very first work he undertook upon his release was the writing of a syndicated newspaper column exposing prison conditions.

But, Debs found his nerves worn and his heart tired. He had lost 25 pounds in prison.

His nights were filled with agony as he would lie awake, his whole body wracked with a pain that would make rest impossible. These were the same kind of attacks that tormented him while in prison. After such ordeals, he was—to use his own words—“not good for anything.”

Despite everything that his wife and brother could do, it was clear he needed special care. In the summer of 1922, Debs entered Lindlahr Sanitarium at Elmhurst, Illinois.

While confined in the sanitarium, Debs heard of the arrest in Denver, Colorado, of William Z. Foster, leader of the great steel strike of 1919, who himself was later to become a candidate for President on the Communist Party ticket. While on a speaking engagement, in August, 1922, Foster had been taken across the Wyoming state line in an automobile, turned over to a sheriff and told to head east and never try to talk union in that area again.

When Debs found out about this, he immediately sat down and wrote Foster a letter congratulating him on his integrity and courage and expressing the hope that both of them would soon be working together.

“ . . . I need not sympathize with you, nor bid you to be strong, for you have the strength to stand and withstand, and you need no sympathy, and all I have to say is that when I have recovered my strength sufficiently to take up my work again, I shall be with you shoulder to shoulder in your stand for the workingclass and industrial freedom . . . ”

Soon after this letter was written, Debs felt sufficiently rested to leave Lindlahr and to take up his work again. He went on a lecture tour.

At times he was warmly welcomed. In April, 1923, the lower house of the Wisconsin General Assembly passed a resolution expressing its “appreciation and gratitude to Eugene V. Debs for his long life and unselfish service in the interests of humanity” and recommended that the legislators go in a body to listen to him in the University gymnasium.

At times, however, efforts were made to bar him. In Cincinnati, in July, 1923, the Chamber of Commerce, the Kiwanis Club, the Rotary Club and the American Legion tried to stop him from speaking. However, despite this formidable array, Debs spoke at the city's Labor Temple.

As usual, Debs minced no words in his many speeches and writings. In May, 1923, he made a series of attacks on ex-President William Howard Taft, then Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, for having accepted an annuity of \$10,000 from the late Andrew Carnegie.

In October, 1923 in reply to a question on whether he favored a soldiers' bonus, he said: “Yes, of course, I am in favor of a bonus. If I had the power, I would take all the stolen billions away from the profiteers and give it to these soldier boys.”

In the same year Debs spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan,

appealing to the Negro people to unite and fight back against the attacks of this terrorist order.

This was the Debs who struck out hard against the motion picture *Birth of the Nation* in a magazine article:

"The Ku Klux Klan are glorified in these pictures as spotless knights . . . all care is taken not to portray any of the outrages perpetrated upon defenseless, unoffending Negroes by these same lawless night-riders. . . . If it is absolutely essential to the play to present these harrowing rape scenes, then why not round them out . . . and show the dissolute son of the plantation owner ravishing the black daughters before their parents' eyes. . . ."

In the meantime, Debs was again actively engaged in the labor movement. For, in the final analysis, this was his work. He loved above all to serve the millions of men and women who labored in the factories and mines of the nation. He was of them and they were of him.

The year 1922 saw Debs supporting the nationwide strikes of coal miners and railroad workers. These strikes were called to stop the wage-slashing policies of employers who used "the hard times" to retrench, that is, hold on to their profits by reducing labor costs.

Debs urged the miners and railroad men "to strike together, vote together, and fight together." For this advice, Debs was bitterly assailed in the newspapers of the day.

While the newspapers were referring to Debs as "a twisted-brained old man," the strikers recognized him as a loyal friend. As one of them expressed it simply: "He is a good fellow and a friend of the working man, all right."

As in 1894, so in 1922, Debs saw the government use a sweeping injunction to break the railroad strike. The injunction obtained by Harding's Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty, in the United States District Court in Chicago, was applicable throughout the country against strikers and union officials.

Shortly thereafter, the railroad strike came to an end. The

coal miners had also been defeated. Debs was troubled when he saw the greatest labor unions in the country beaten to a standstill. The defeat could be turned into victory, he felt, if only the railroad men, coal miners, and steel workers would organize into industrial unions and combine their strength. "What a tremendous force they would be for social and industrial betterment in this country!"

The idea of labor unity never left Debs. At the Indiana State Convention of the American Federation of Labor, held in Terre Haute in the summer of 1925, he said:

"This is an age of organization. Your power is in unity. Everything depends on solidarity . . . Unorganized you are helpless, you are held in contempt. Power comes through unity. Agitation or stagnation, which will you take? The labor movement must either go forward or backward. Merge your craft unions!"

Debs did not succumb to "red-baiting," a device used by the enemies of labor to split and destroy unions. When Debs read in a Terre Haute newspaper shortly after his release from prison that Gompers had called William Z. Foster a "Bolshevik," he commented:

"Anybody who stands for progress in the American labor movement is a Bolshevik in the eyes of Mr. Gompers . . . Foster has the right idea of a labor organization, but the pity of it is that he will not be able to make any headway with industrial unionism as long as Gompers and his crowd hold labor by the throat."

Similarly, Debs assailed the "red-baiting" tactics of Billy Sunday, a leading evangelist of the day. Not long after Debs's release from prison, Billy Sunday spoke in Charlestown, West Virginia. A local newspaper printed the evangelist's speech which said in part:

"I am a friend of the union man. I have championed the cause of the union man all my life, but I am dead against the radical in whatever form he may appear. He's the bird I'm

after. America, I call you back to God! . . . Every woman in Russia between the ages of fourteen and forty-five is a common prostitute under the Soviet system. That's the gang that would feast on American institutions."

Debs was furious when he heard of Billy Sunday's speech, especially the reference to Soviet women.

"I wish I had the strength to go to Charlestown and meet that vulture on a public platform. I would strip him to his naked hide and demand that he eat that insult against a race of noble women. God damn him!"

Debs displayed great sympathy for the Russian people during the famine of 1921-22. Upon his release from jail, he had traveled in a day coach to Washington, giving the Pullman fare the government had furnished him to Friends of Soviet Russia for the Famine Relief Fund.

In a public statement on October 8, 1922, Debs declared: "It matters not what its mistakes have been, nor what may be charged against it, the Russian Revolution . . . is the greatest, most luminous and far-reaching achievement in the entire sweep of human history . . ."

"The Soviet Government is the beginning of the self-government of the people throughout the world . . . It stands and will stand monumental of the revolutionary spirit in which it was born . . . and of the peace, freedom and happiness it is destined to achieve for the whole of mankind."

Debs was essentially a fighter who placed devotion to the working class above everything else. His voice and pen were always ready to aid those victimized for their advanced social and political beliefs. Thus, Debs had thrown himself into the campaign to free Nicola Sacco, a factory worker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler, who were sentenced to death in 1921 for the murder of two men in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Because of the framed testimony of witnesses and the "lynch" spirit of the trial judge—the case attracted worldwide

*This is the five dollar bill  
received by me from the U. S.  
Government on leaving the Atlanta  
prison and contributed by me to  
the Sacco Vanzetti Defense Fund  
Eugene V. Debs  
Dec. 25th 1921*

When Gene Debs was released from Atlanta prison, one of his first acts was to send his "prison money"—the few dollars given to every ex-convict upon release—as a contribution to the fund for the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti. Above note, in Debs's handwriting, says: "This is the five dollar bill received by me from the U. S. Government on leaving the Atlanta prison and contributed by me to the Sacco Vanzetti Defense Fund. Eugene V. Debs, Dec. 25th, 1921."

as well as nationwide attention. For more than six years it was before the courts of Massachusetts.

One of the first things Debs did after his release from Atlanta was to send his "prison money," the five dollars given him by the government "to start a new life," to the Sacco-Vanzetti Defense Committee.

In response to the gift, Frank Lopez, secretary of the committee, wrote: "To us it seems somehow beautifully symbolic of workingclass solidarity . . . that the best known and best loved of American proletarian leaders should give [his] 'prison money' . . . to the defense of two humble foreign toilers caught in the vise of reaction."

More than four years later, after the Supreme Court of Massachusetts had upheld the Sacco and Vanzetti decision, Debs issued a passionate "Appeal to American Labor" to save the two men from the electric chair.

"The capitalist courts of Massachusetts," Debs declared, "have had [the condemned men] on the rack day and night, devouring the flesh of their bodies and torturing their souls for six long years . . . It is for labor now to speak and for the labor movement to announce its decision, and that decision is and must be, Sacco and Vanzetti are innocent and shall not die!"

When this flaming manifesto was issued in May 1926, Debs was a very sick man. Broken in health, he had gone to Bermuda with his wife for a rest. But the trip had done him little good.

In September, the seventy-one year old Debs re-entered the Lindlaur Sanitarium at Elmhurst, Illinois. But treatment there was of no avail.

On October 20, 1926, at 7:44 P.M., with his wife and brother at his bedside, Eugene Victor Debs died peacefully.

Debs's name was honored by working people throughout the world.

The news of his passing shocked and saddened millions.

Wherever Debs had been known, personally or through his work, he was deeply loved.

In Madison Square Garden in New York City, a huge meeting paid its respects to the memory of Debs.

In Terre Haute, the president of the Central Labor Union requested that Debs's body be allowed to lie in state at the town's Labor Temple.

"You will have to give him to us for a while, Theodore," the union leader said to Gene's brother. "*You know he belongs to us.*"

Many years have passed since Eugene V. Debs died. But the struggle to which he dedicated his life continues and grows ever sharper.

During his lifetime, Debs saw many of the social changes for which he fought come into effect. He saw a lusty labor movement—of which he was part—grow in size and influence. He saw it come out of swaddling clothes to challenge powerful advocates of the "open shop." He saw labor fight for the right to organize, for the eight-hour workday, for national unions built on industrial lines.

Debs also witnessed the effects of popular political action as well as third-party movements on the older political parties. And he saw flowing from such political activity the adoption of woman suffrage, passage of workingmen's compensation laws, steps toward the abolition of child labor, and the popular election of United States senators.

And it was not long after Debs died that the people won other gains for which he and those with him fought.

During the 1930's powerful militant industrial unions—open to all workers regardless of sex, color, creed or craft—were organized in the mass production industries of the country. Debs's long fight for industrial unionism was matched by the increasing political activity of working people who in the Debs

tradition won for themselves important gains in the direction of social security, old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, and a shorter workday.

In addition, forward steps were taken by the people in defense of their democratic rights, something near and dear to Debs who in his day was victimized for the fight he made to defend the rights of workers, women, Negroes and national minority groups. For Debs well knew that unless the civil liberties of *all* people were defended, the right of labor to organize, economically and politically, was in danger.

Working people of America have come a long way since the old railroad labor leader, Joshua Leach, convinced the "tow-headed" young man from Terre Haute that the union was the place for him.

But, in the words of Eugene Debs, labor leader and fighter for socialism, much remains to be done before "men and women can walk the highlands and enjoy the vision of a land . . . rejuvenated and resplendent in the triumph of Freedom and Civilization."

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#### NOTES ON SOURCES

An up-to-date collection of the writings of Eugene V. Debs is sorely needed. Although the Girard edition entitled *Debs: His Life, Writings and Speeches* contains many of the principal works of Debs, it only covers the period to 1908. However, it is a valuable collection, its merit being enhanced by some first-hand material contained in the introductory section by Stephen M. Reynolds. Another valuable, though less extensive, collection is the one edited by Alexander Trachtenberg, *Speeches of Eugene V. Debs*, in *Voices of Revolt*, Vol. IX. This collection, in addition to a provocative introduction by the editor contains significant excerpts from some of Debs's later writings on the labor movement, the Socialist Party, World War I, and the Russian Revolution.

David Karsner's *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters* is one of a number of books on Debs. It contains much valuable material because of its Boswell-like character, though it tends too much on the sentimental side. McAlister Coleman's *Eugene V. Debs, A Man Unafraid* leaves much to be desired from both a factual and interpretive viewpoint. Floy R. Painter's *That Man Debs and His Life Work* is a carefully documented book, though somewhat heavy and pedantic in style.

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